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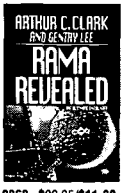

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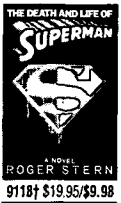

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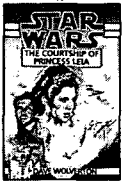

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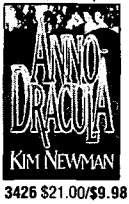

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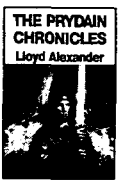

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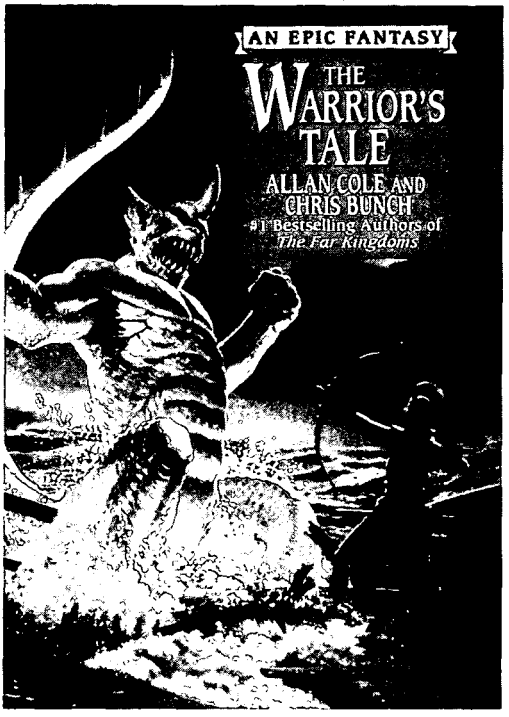

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

THE OTHER DAY my husband brought home *The Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Seventh Series, edited by Anthony Boucher, and published by Ace in the mid-1950s. We collect these volumes, and make a game of finding the ones that we are missing. My favorites come from the 1950s, when *F&SF* was still young and proving itself. The introductions alone are worth the price of the search, especially the early ones, read with the value of hindsight, in which the editors defend their vision.

In the introduction to the seventh volume, Boucher wrote:

> The trouble with generalizing, as introductions are apt to, about The Future of Science Fiction is that you have no idea what as yet unpublished writers are coming along, tomorrow or the next day, to shape the future.
>
> The one thing we can be sure of, if the past is any guide, is that there will always be a fresh new generation of creators, and that the best of the Old Pros will match strides with the eager innovations of the Bright Young Men — which seems a most healthy and satisfactory state of affairs.

I read that passage as I prepared to write this editorial. I have been looking forward to our December issue for some time, because I am finally able to share the Le Guin and Bradbury stories with you, because Harlan Ellison's film column is back, and because of the newer writers in these pages. But I didn't know quite how to approach this topic. I knew what I wanted to say, but not how to say it. And then I discovered that a previous editor of the magazine had said it more succinctly than I ever could — forty years ago.

The only thing that Anthony Boucher missed, in his look at the Future of Science Fiction, was the one thing we do not like thinking about. The day comes when our

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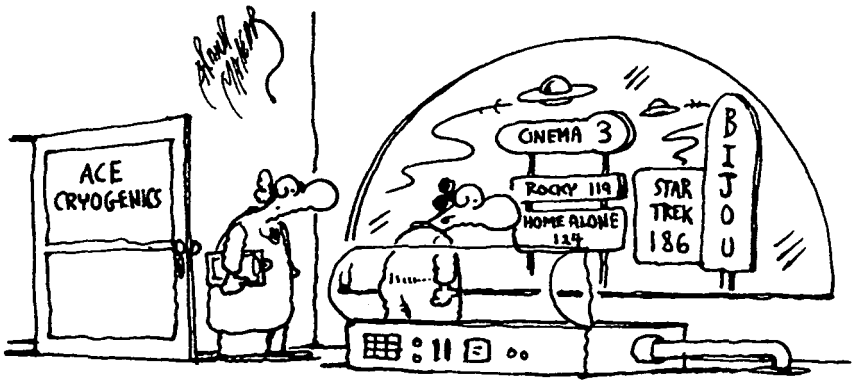
favorite writer stops producing and all that remains is what he has already written. Such is the case with Isaac Asimov.

Readers still write about how they miss his column, and we do too. One of his great regrets was that he was unable to complete his 400th column for *F&SF* before he died. Fortunately for us, his wife Janet has completed the column for us, and we are able to include it in this issue.

Because I was thinking about the history of science fiction, the history of *F&SF*, and the legacies writers leave after I read the Boucher introduction, I went to my collection of *F&SFs* and pulled down the November 1958 issue. In there is the first Isaac Asimov science column, "The Dust of Ages." To introduce the column, editor Robert P. Mills wrote:

> *F&SF* announces delightedly that it has managed to retain the rare insight, genial personality, and scientific erudition of the good Dr. Isaac Asimov, and that the intriguing results of his restless curiosity about physical phenomena and related matters will appear regularly in this new column.

Who could have predicted that the column would run over thirty years, through editorial changes and societal upheavals, through the rise and fall of many Old Pros, and the arrival of many Bright Young Men? We have been proud to have Isaac Asimov be a part of the magazine for so long, and we are happy to present his 400th column.



"FREEZE ME AGAIN."

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Ray Bradbury's most recent appearance in F&SF, *"From the Dust Returned" (September, 1994) has already garnered a great deal of excitement among our readers. He has returned this month with a very different offering, "Last Rites." As he has done in such classic short stories as "A Sound of Thunder," he explores the possibilities of time travel and finds a territory that is uniquely Bradbury.*

Last Rites

By Ray Bradbury

HARRISON COOPER WAS NOT that old, only thirty-nine, touching at the warm rim of forty rather than the cold rim of thirty, which makes a great difference in temperature and attitude. He was a genius verging on the brilliant, unmarried, unengaged, with no children that he could honestly claim, so having nothing much else to do, woke one morning in the summer of 1999, weeping.

"Why!?"

Out of bed he faced his mirror to watch the tears, examine his sadness, trace the woe. Like a child, curious after emotion, he charted his own map, found no capital city of despair, but only a vast and empty expanse of sorrow, and went to shave.

Which didn't help, for Harrison Cooper had stumbled on some secret supply of melancholy that even as he shaved, spilled in rivulets down his soaped cheeks.

"Great God," he cried. "I'm at a funeral but *who's* dead?!"

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He ate his breakfast toast somewhat soggier than usual and plunged off to his laboratory to see if gazing at his Time Traveler would solve the mystery of eyes that shed rain while the rest of him stood fair.

Time Traveler? Ah, yes.

For Harrison Cooper had spent the better part of his third decade wiring circuitries of impossible pasts and as yet untouchable futures. Most men philosophize in their as-beautiful-as-women cars. Harrison Cooper chose to dream and knock together from pure air and electric thunderclaps what he called his Mobius Machine.

He had told his friends, with wine-colored nonchalance, that he was taking a future strip and a past strip, giving them a Now half twist, so they looped on a single plane. Like those figure-eight ribbons, cut and pasted by that dear mathematician A.F. Mobius in the 19th Century.

"Ah, yes, Mobius," friends murmured.

What they really meant was, "Ah, *no*. Good night."

Harrison Cooper was not a mad scientist but he was irretrievably boring. Knowing this, he had retreated to finish the Mobius Machine. Now, this strange morning, with cold rain streaming from his eyes, he stood staring at the damned contraption, bewildered that he was not dancing about with Creation's joy.

He was interrupted by the ringing of the laboratory doorbell and opened the door to find one of those rare people, a real Western Union delivery boy on a real bike. He signed for the telegram and was about to shut the door when he saw the lad staring fixedly at the Mobius Machine.

"What," exclaimed the boy, eyes wide, "is *that*?"

Harrison Cooper stood aside and let the boy wander in a great circle around his Machine, his eyes dancing up, over and around the immense circling figure-eight of shining copper, brass, and silver.

"Sure!" cried the boy, at last, beaming. "A *Time* Machine!"

"Bullseye!"

"When do you leave?" said the boy. "Where will you go to meet which person where? Alexander? Caesar? Napoleon! Hitler?!"

"No, no!"

The boy exploded his list. "Lincoln— "

"More *like* it."

"General Grant! Roosevelt! Benjamin Franklin?"

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"Franklin, yes!"

"Aren't you *lucky*?"

"Am I?" Stunned, Harrison Cooper found himself nodding. "Yes, by God, and suddenly — "

Suddenly he knew why he had wept at dawn.

He grabbed the young lad's hand. "Much thanks. You're a catalyst — "

"Cat — ?"

"A Rorschach Test — making me draw my *own* list — now gently, swiftly — *out*! No offense."

The door slammed. He ran for his library phone, punched numbers, waited, scanning the thousand books on the shelves.

"Yes, yes," he murmured, his eyes flicking over the gorgeous sun-bright titles. "Some of you. Two, three, maybe four. Hello! Sam? Samuel! Can you get here in five minutes, make it three? Dire emergency. Come!"

He slammed the phone, swiveled to reach out and touch.

"Shakespeare," he murmured. "Willy — William, will it be — *you*?"

The laboratory door opened and Sam/Samuel stuck his head in and froze.

For there, seated in the midst of his great Mobius figure-eight, leather jacket and boots shined, picnic lunch packed, was Harrison Cooper, arms flexed, elbows out, fingers alert to the computer controls.

"Where's your Lindbergh cap and goggles?" asked Samuel.

Harrison Cooper dug them out, put them on, smirking.

"Raise the Titanic, then sink it!" Samuel strode to the lovely machine to confront its rather outré occupant. "Well, Cooper, *what*?" he cried.

"I woke this morning in tears."

"Sure. I read the phone book aloud, last night. That *did* it!"

"No. You read me *these*!"

Cooper handed the books over.

"Sure! We gabbed till three, drunk as owls on English Lit!"

"To give me tears for *answers*!"

"To what?"

"To their loss. To the fact that they died unknown, unrecognized, to the grim fact that some were only truly recognized, republished, raved over from 1920 on!"

"Cut the cackle and move the buns," said Samuel. "Did you call to

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sermonize or ask advice?"

Harrison Cooper leaped from his machine and elbowed Samuel into the library.

"You must map my trip for me!"

"Trip? Trip!"

"I go a-journeying, far-traveling, the Grand Literary Tour. A Salvation Army of one!"

"To save lives?"

"No, souls! What good is life, if the soul's dead? *Sit!* Tell me all the authors we raved on by night to weep me at dawn. Here's brandy. Drink! Remember?"

"I *do*!"

"List them then! The New England Melancholic first. Sad, recluse from land, should have drowned at sea, a lost soul of sixty! Now, what *other* sad geniuses did we maunder over — "

"God!" Samuel cried. "You're going to tour *them*? Oh, Harrison, Harry, I love you!"

"Shut up! Remember how you write jokes? Laugh and think *backward!* So, let us cry and leap up our tear ducts to the source. Weep for Whales to find minnows!"

"Last night I think I quoted — "

"Yes?"

"And then we spoke — "

"Go on — "

"Well."

Samuel gulped his brandy. Fire burned his eyes.

"Write *this* down!"

They wrote and ran.

"What will you do when you get there, Librarian Doctor?"

Harrison Cooper, seated back in the shadow of the great hovering Mobius ribbon, laughed and nodded. "Yes! Harrison Cooper, L.M.D. Literary Meadow Doctor. Curer of fine old lions off-their-feed, in dire need of tender love, small applause, the wine of words, all in my heart, all on my tongue. Say *'ah!'* So long. Good-bye!"

"God bless!"

He slammed a lever, whirled a knob, and the machine, in a spiral of

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metal, a whisk of butterfly ribbon, very simply — vanished.

A moment later, the Mobius Machine gave a twist of its atoms and — returned.

"Voilà!" cried Harrison Cooper, pink faced and wild eyed. "It's *done*!"

"So soon?" exclaimed his friend Samuel.

"A minute here, but hours there!"

"Did you succeed?"

"Look! Proof positive."

For tears dripped off his chin.

"What happened? What?!"

"This, and this...and...this!

A GYROSCOPE SPUN, a celebratory ribbon spiraled endlessly on itself, and the ghost of a massive window curtain haunted the air, exhaled and then ceased.

As if fallen from a delivery-chute, the books arrived almost before the footfalls and then the half seen feet and then the fog-wrapped legs and body and at last the head of the man who, as the ribbon spiraled itself back into emptiness, crouched over the volumes as if warming himself at a hearth.

He touched the books and listened to the air in the dim hallway where dinner-time voices drifted up from below and a door stood wide near his elbow, from which the faint scent of illness came and went, arrived and departed with the stilted breathing of some patient within the room. Plates and silverware sounded from the world of evening and quiet good health downstairs. The hall and the sickroom were for a time deserted. In a moment, someone might ascend with a tray for the half-sleeping man in the intemperate room.

Harrison Cooper rose with stealth, checking the stairwell and then, carrying a sweet burden of books, moved into the room where candles lit both sides of a bed where the dying man lay supine, arms straight at his sides, head weighting the pillow, eyes grimaced shut, mouth set as if daring the ceiling, mortality itself, to sink and extinguish him.

At the first touch of the books, now on one side, now on the other, of his bed, the old man's eyelids fluttered, his dry lips cracked; the air whistled from his nostrils:

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"Who's there?" he whispered. "What time is it?"

"'Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth, whenever it is a damp drizzly November in my soul, then I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can,'" replied the traveler at the foot of the bed, quietly.

"What, what?" the old man in the bed whispered, swiftly.

"'It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation,'" quoted the visitor, who now moved to place a book under each of the dying man's hands where his tremoring fingers could scratch, pull away, then touch, Braille-like, again.

One by one, the stranger held up book after book, to show the covers, then a page, and yet another title page where printed dates of this novel surfed up, adrift, but to stay forever on some far future shore.

The sick man's eyes lingered over the covers, the titles, the dates and then fixed to his visitor's bright face. He exhaled, stunned. "My God, you have the look of a traveler. From *where*?"

"Do the years show?" Harrison Cooper leaned forward. "Well, then — I bring you an Annunciation."

"Such things come to pass only with virgins," whispered the old man. "No virgin lies here buried under his unread books."

"I come to unbury you. I bring tidings from a far place."

The sick man's eyes moved to the books beneath his trembling hands.

"Mine?" he whispered.

The traveler nodded, solemnly, but began to smile when the color in the old man's face grew warmer and the expression in his eyes and mouth was suddenly eager.

"*Is* there hope then?"

"There is!"

"I believe you." The old man took a breath and then wondered, "Why?"

"Because," said the stranger at the foot of the bed, "I love you.

"I do not *know* you, sir!"

"But I know you fore and aft, port to starboard, maingallants to gunnels, every day in your long life to here!

"Oh, the sweet sound!" cried the old man. "Every word that you say, every light from your eyes is foundation-of-the-world true! How can it be?" Tears winked from the old man's lids. "Why?"

"Because I am the truth," said the Traveler. "I have come a long way to

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find and say: you are not lost. Your great Beast has only drowned some little while. In another year, lost ahead, great and glorious, plain and simple men will gather at your grave and shout: he breeches, he rises, he breeches, he rises! and the white shape will surface to the light, the great terror lift into the storm and thunderous St. Elmo's fires and you with him, each bound to each, and no way to tell where he stops and you start or where you stop and he goes off around the world lifting a fleet of libraries in his and your wake through nameless seas of sub-sub-librarians and readers mobbing the docks to chart your far journeyings, alert for your lost cries at three of a wild morn."

"Christ's wounds!" said the man in his winding-sheet bedclothes. "To the point, man, the *point!* Do you speak truth!?"

"I give you my hand on it, and pledge my soul and my heart's blood." The visitor moved to do just this, and the two men's fists fused as one. "Take these gifts to the grave. Count these pages like a rosary in your last hours. Tell no one where they came from. Scoffers would knock the ritual beads from your fingers. So tell this rosary in the dark before dawn, and the rosary is this: you will live forever. You are immortal."

"No more of this, no more! Be still."

"I cannot. Hear me. Where you have passed a fire path will burn, miraculous in the Bengal Bay, the Indian Seas, Hope's Cape and around the Horn, past perdition's landfall, as far as living eyes can see."

He gripped the old man's fist ever more tightly.

"I swear. In the years ahead, a million millions will crowd your grave to sleep you well and warm your bones. Do you hear?"

"Great God, you are a proper priest to sound my Last Rites. And will I enjoy my own funeral? I will."

His hands, freed, clung to the books at each side, as the ardent visitor raised yet other books and intoned the dates:

"1922...1930...1935...1940...1955...1970. Can you read and know what it means?"

He held the last volume close to the old man's face. The fiery eyes moved. The old mouth creaked.

"1990?"

"Yours. One hundred years from tonight."

"Dear God!"

"I must go, but I *would* hear. Chapter One. Speak."

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The old man's eyes slid and burned. He licked his lips, traced the words, and at last whispered, beginning to weep:

"Call me Ishmael."

There was snow and more snow and more snow after that. In the dissolving whiteness, the silver ribbon twirled in a massive whisper to let forth in an exhalation of Time the journeying librarian and his bookbag. As if slicing white bread rinsed by snow, the ribbon, as the traveler ghosted himself to flesh, sifted him through the hospital wall into a room as white as December. There, abandoned, lay a man as pale as the snow and the wind. Almost young, he slept with his mustaches oiled to his lip by fever. He seemed not to know nor care that a messenger had invaded the air near his bed. His eyes did not stir nor did his mouth increase the passage of breath. His hands at his sides did not open to receive. He seemed already lost in a tomb and only his unexpected visitor's voice caused his eyes to roll behind their shut lids.

"Are you forgotten?" a voice asked.

"Unborn," the pale man replied.

"Never remembered?"

"Only. Only in. France.

"Wrote nothing at all?"

"Not worthy."

"Feel the weight of what I place on your bed. No, don't look. *Feel*."

"Tombstones."

"With names yes, but not tombstones. Not marble but paper. Dates, yes, but the day after tomorrow and tomorrow and ten thousand after that. And your name on each."

"It will not be."

"*Is*. Let me speak the names. Listen. Masque?"

"Red Death."

"The Fall of — "

"Usher!"

"Pit?"

"Pendulum!"

"Telltale?"

"Heart! *My* heart. Heart!"

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"Repeat: For the love of God, Montresor."

"Silly."

"Repeat. Montresor, for the love of God."

"For the love of God, Montresor!"

"Do you see this label?"

"I see!"

"Read the date."

"1994. No such date."

"Again, and the name of the wine."

"1994. Amontillado. And my name!"

"Yes! Now shake your head. Make the fool's-cap bells ring. Here's mortar for the last brick. Quickly. I'm here to bury you alive with books. When death comes, how will you greet him? With a shout and — ?"

"*Requiescat in pace*?"

"Say it again."

"*Requiescat in pace*!"

The Time Wind roared, the room emptied. Nurses ran in, summoned by laughter, and tried to seize the books that weighed down his joy.

"What's he *saying*?" someone cried.

In Paris, an hour, a day, a year, a minute later, there was a run of St. Elmo's fire along a church steeple, a blue glow in a dark alley, a soft tread at a street corner, a turnabout of wind like an invisible carousel, and then footfalls up a stair to a door which opened on a bedroom where a window looked out upon cafés filled with people and far music and in a bed by the window, a tall man lying, his pale face immobile, until he heard alien breath in his room.

The shadow of a man stood over him and now leaned down so that the light from the window revealed a face and a mouth as it inhaled and then spoke. The single word that the mouth said was:

"Oscar?"

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Smilla's Sense of Snow by Peter Hoeg, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 453 pages, $21.00, Dell, 512 pages, $6.50.

The Best Defense by Kate Wilhelm, St. Martin's Press, 352 pages, $21.95.

The Orchid Eater by Marc Laidlaw, St. Martin's Press, 240 pages, $19.95.

IT'S NO accident that Edgar Allan Poe pioneered both the science fiction story (see "Mellonta Tauta," etc.) and the detective story in American literature, nor that many sf writers (including Barry Malzberg, Anthony Boucher, Harlan Ellison, Marta Randall, and Richard Lupoff, to name a few) have turned their pens successfully toward mystery and detective fiction. There's a distinct similarity between the two forms, an intellectual sisterhood that runs deeper than their common roots in the pulp magazines of the early decades of the century. How much difference can there be, after all, between a story that hinges on the hero's knowledge of the idiosyncracies of various sorts of firearms or the drying times of different inks and a story that depends on intimate knowledge of the laws of planetary motion or whether a match will light in free fall?

Danish author Peter Hoeg's best-selling mystery thriller, *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, is a case in point. In essence it's a typical detective story, albeit an exceptionally well-crafted one: the mysterious death of a little boy leads Smilla Jaspersen, a neighbor who had befriended him, to investigate, and as she turns up intimations of broader schemes she's drawn deeper into her search, and into danger. Smilla is half native Greenlander and half Danish, trained by her mother in her people's traditional snowcraft and by Danish universities in the scientific ice-lore of Europe, and there's something undeniably science-fictional about her deep

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knowledge of ice and snow. Smilla can recognize dozens of types of ice on sight, knows how fast they form under various conditions, and can read more from a series of footprints in snow than Sherlock Holmes.

She's also devoted to mathematics and the mystery of numbers: "If anyone asked me what makes me truly happy," she muses, "I would say: numbers. Snow and ice and numbers." Her insights and occasional lectures on these subjects provide just the sort of data-thrill the hard sf aficionado should appreciate. At one point, looking over the stalactites in an ice cavern, Smilla spontaneously digresses into a discussion of a stalactite's mass, citing an equation ("$M = \pi D^2/4\, Q_a L$"), "where D is the diameter, L is the length, Q_a is the density of the ice, and π in the numerator of the fraction is, of course, a result of the fact that we are calculating based on a hemispheric drop with a diameter set at 4.9 mm." It's hard to imagine even Hal Clement or Robert Forward getting much more technical than that.

But there's a lot more to Hoeg's book that should appeal to the sf reader. In fact, toward the end (I'll try not to give too much away), it takes an indisputably science-fictional turn, with discussions of silicon-based lifeforms and open references to Jules Verne's *The Hunt for a Meteor*, H. Beam Piper's *Uller Uprising*, and the works of H.G. Wells. Of course, this doesn't mean that *Smilla's Sense of Snow* is *really* a science fiction book more than a detective story, but it does tend to underline the essential likeness at the core of the forms, along with some of their differences.

Events toward the close of *Smilla's Sense of Snow* make it a sort of inverted version of John W. Campbell's famous short story, "Who Goes There?" (filmed twice as *The Thing*). There's something found in the ice which may have come from outer space, which may be alive, and which may have spawned an infectious threat that could imperil the globe. But where in Campbell's story that discovery is just the beginning—his story concentrates on working out the consequences and the efforts of the discoverers to prevent the alien from threatening the world—Hoeg's novel ends without exploring it much at all. *Smilla's Sense of Snow* is concerned almost entirely with getting there, not with what happens then; it's as if Campbell had started his story with the outfitting of the Antarctic expedition, followed the scientists on their journey south, detailed some of their personal interactions, seen them settled in their base, and

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closed the story with them finding something mysterious in the ice.

Which might prove a little unsatisfying to the reader of science fiction, whose interest will be piqued only to be left hanging. But it shouldn't be too disappointing, since Hoeg's book offers something meatier than an alien invasion plot to chew on: the sf turn at its end provides the perfect hook for seeing in *Smilla's Sense of Snow* a meditation on the philosophical shifts which have shaped our culture over the past 60 years, and which have shaped sf distinctively over that time. On the one hand there's Tørk Hviid, the principal villain of the story, who comes to the forefront as the book approaches its climactic scenes. As we see more of him, we recognize Tørk as the embodiment of certain attitudes associated with sf's "Golden Age" (and with society in general at the time). He's a bold adventurer, a man of science, willing to risk personal disaster and global catastrophe in the name of discovery. It's Tørk who refers to Verne, Wells and Piper, along with the Golden Age faith that "writers see where we're headed before the scientists do." He's possessed by a utopian vision of science as savior, to the extent that even scientific armageddon might be a force of good: "Death is always a waste," he says. "But sometimes it's the only way to arouse people."

Where Campbell might have presented such a figure as his hero, Hoeg makes him vile. He's the representative of an outmoded and even dangerous philosophy. Smilla, on the other hand, embodies a familiar ambivalence toward science and its works, the sort of ambivalence which frequently imbues contemporary science fiction and frustrates devotees of the old-style gee-whiz story. Despite her fondness for equations and scientific analysis, she's aware of the limits of scientific answers ("The limited ability of science to explain things has always interested me"). On the one hand she feels the allure of scientific investigation, seeing it as a basic human drive — "To want to understand is an attempt to recapture something we have lost" — but on the other, she recognizes the need for more than one sort of knowledge — "To explain a phenomenon is to distance yourself from it." Smilla stands between two worlds, that of a traditional non-Western people and that of a modern European state, yet she doesn't simply reject everything modern in favor of the primitive; she takes the best of both worlds, and makes good cases against the romanticization of premodern cultures.

In her final confrontation with

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Tørk, her mistrust of his Golden Age philosophy becomes clearest; she sees his attitude toward his discovery as typical of "the attitude of Western science toward the world. Calculation, hatred, hope, fear, the attempt to measure everything. And above all else, stronger than any empathy for living things: the desire for money." All in all, Smilla's ambivalence toward science illustrates contemporary attitudes which have changed the shape and spirit of science fiction. Not coincidentally, I think, Smilla resembles the sort of character found in the work of Pat Cadigan and other hip cyberpunkish writers: she's gritty, tough, no-nonsense; she seems unhappy in an almost religious way, as if by conviction rather than circumstance; she emits an aura of nihilism and isolationism but pursues a course dictated by the idealism and humanitarian concern hidden under her rough exterior.

Perhaps the most perfect illustration of the differences between Golden Age and contemporary sf to be found in *Smilla's Sense of Snow* comes in the very last line: "There will be no resolution." Hoeg's novel stops before any clear answers can be found, no firm explanations of the mysterious object/creature under the ice, no final word on the fate of Tørk or Smilla. What we've lost (or given up) since the days of Campbell is that certainty, moral and technological, that informed so much of the Golden Age work. It might strike many as odd that a mystery thriller (and a popular one at that) could have so much to say about the state of affairs in sf at the moment, but I don't think it should; rather, it should reinforce the sense of close ties between the mystery/detective tradition and our own.

Given Kate Wilhelm's achievements in sf, such connections would probably be less surprising in her latest mystery novel, *The Best Defense*, a sequel to her riveting courtroom thriller *Death Qualified*. In fact, *The Best Defense* doesn't offer nearly so much opportunity for reflection on the general condition of sf, but it does reveal a lot more about the links between mysteries and science fiction, in addition to being a gripping novel in its own right (it kept me up all night, literally, and it's been a long time since a book did that to me).

The Best Defense brings back lawyer Barbara Holloway, still in semi-retirement after the harrowing events of *Death Qualified*. Supporting herself on her savings and by offering her legal services inexpensively to the people of her neighbor-

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hood (she keeps "office hours" at a local restaurant), Barbara meets the sister of Paula Kennerman, a woman accused of killing her own daughter and then setting fire to the battered-women's safe house where she and her child had taken refuge, in order to cover her crime. The public has already condemned the "baby killer," and a local right-wing paper has embarked on a vicious campaign against Kennerman; the woman's court-appointed defender, a rising young attorney with his eyes on an early partnership, seems to think Kennerman's best chance is to plead guilty and hope for a compassionate sentence. Grudgingly, Barbara decides to get involved, and before long she's in as deep as she can get, seeing hints of a larger conspiracy behind the crime. She's determined to clear Kennerman and at the same time to bring those she believes responsible — who, not insignificantly, are rabid antiabortionists and frequent wife-beaters — to justice.

Though this case, like its predecessor in *Death Qualified*, turns on some elements of scientific knowledge, this factor is much more subdued than in *Smilla's Sense of Snow*. Even the technical detail that plays a part — dealing with birth control methods and psychological traumas such as Battered Wife Syndrome — don't have the "hard" feel of Smilla's insights into ice and math. But at a deeper level *The Best Defense* shares a spirit with the hardest of hard sf. In both types of fiction, the construction and resolution of the plot depend on an assumed context of general principles, and the competence of the heroine to pierce the veils and find the truth depends on her sense of that context. With mysteries, the context tends to involve the principles of human psychology and social interaction — the unraveling of the mystery involves the determination of likely motives, actions and reactions — while in sf the context tends to be the laws of physics or chemistry, or the logic of time travel. In this case, Barbara's ability to read her witnesses — her attunement to the contextual framework — is vital to her success, and it has all the feel of an engineer's intuitive sense of torque, or a physicist's sense of the "beauty" of a new theory. The reader's awareness of the context is what provides the pleasant thrill of recognition as each piece of the mystery falls into place; the revelations feel right when they seem to make sense, given the habits of human interaction.

Last year, in an essay for *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, John Kessel observed that contemporary mainstream fiction tends to shy

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away from larger perspectives and generalized implications, preferring to emphasize the minute evocation of specific places, people, and small-scale events, while sf continues to embrace a more generalized perspective, inviting broad metaphorical and symbolic readings, even in stories confined to familiar milieux and recognizable contemporary settings. Sf remains interested in big questions.

I think mysteries do, too. In both cases there's often a sense of some eternal drama playing itself out — that the specific plot and characters we're watching, as individualized as they might be, are also representative of some cosmic pattern. That drama might be the dance of the stars and the immutable force of gravity, or the pageant of cultural evolution (which we see replayed in post-holocaust stories such as *A Canticle for Leibowitz*), or it can be the smaller human dramas of betrayal, deceit, passion, what have you; but in both sf and mystery fiction part of the thrill, if not most of it, comes from the recognition of that pattern in the specifics of the story.

But purely mainstream fiction can do this as well; as Kessel points out, the exceedingly narrow focus of much contemporary fiction is a recent development, and the greats of the early part of this century (Joyce, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Wharton) courted the broad perspective without embarrassment. What's different about sf and mystery fiction (and what, therefore, links them) is their methods. The old saw about normal people in abnormal circumstances, general enough to encompass almost anything we'd want to call sf, is also general enough to include mystery and suspense stories. The "abnormal" situation in sf may be something like an alien invasion, time travel, or the gift of telepathy, while in mysteries and suspense fiction it's being framed for murder, blackmailed, or stalked by a serial killer (any of which is more real-world plausible than an sf twist), but the principle is the same. In *The Best Defense*, the abnormal stresses of a sensational murder trial are essential to all of the novel's purposes, from the basics of the plot, to the evocation of feminist rage against culturally tolerated battering and right-wing moral totalitarianism, to the revelations of Barbara's character and her evolving relationship with her father. Like sf, mysteries and suspense novels work by subjecting their characters to a cauldron of extreme forces, and by that alchemy (if they're good) reveal something true about the world.

That's not the only role the

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abnormal plays in such stories. It also provides the central spectacle, the riveting drama that holds our attention, draws us in and onward, impelling us to turn pages. No matter what lessons are learned along the way, no matter how deeply or movingly the author explores her characters or setting, such a dependence on spectacle is what divides mysteries and thrillers (and most other genres, including sf) from general mainstream fiction. By focusing on the abnormal, and relying on a structure that is far more dramatic than real life almost ever is, genre fiction rejects the average and the everyday in favor of the unreal.

The spectacle and drama of a murder charge and a courtroom showdown pervade *The Best Defense*. There's very little time lost on digressive descriptions of mundanities. Many characters — particularly the villains — are more embodiments of certain traits than well-rounded people; they're believable, in a general sense, but not by any means average and ordinary. And the centrality of the spectacle only increases as the tension mounts; once the case moves to court midway through the book, Wilhelm provides only the occasional breather from the proceedings. At one point, her rejection of the everyday is made startlingly clear: "Almost instantly, she was plunged back into the melodrama being enacted in the courtroom. It was as if this was the only reality; all else outside the room was simply busywork, no more than a distraction."

Wilhelm may be rare in making her literary choices so overt, but this kind of tight dramatic focus is typical of mystery and suspense stories. Wilhelm has always excelled at evoking truths of human character and at examining issues of moral principle in her science fiction, and her facility at wringing such revelations from the spectacles of sf translate easily to doing so through the drama of the courtroom. In *The Best Defense*, it's easy to see why there's so much crossover between mysteries and sf; if anything, it makes one wonder why there's not more.

The skills Marc Laidlaw demonstrated in his satirical sf novel *Kalifornia* likewise translate into his very impressive suspense novel, *The Orchid Eater*. Both novels look at growing up in southern California, but otherwise it might not seem at first that the kind of gonzo weirdness that Laidlaw used in *Kalifornia* could have anything to do with the dark, perilous (though sometimes equally funny) atmosphere of *The Orchid Eater*, but they share a basic principle

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— satire and *noir* both rely on a kind of literary exaggeration, a departure from the purely ordinary, magnifying certain aspects of the world in order to look at them more closely.

The Orchid Eater is a fusion of two plots, a coming-of-age tale and a serial-killer story. Mike James, brainy and virginal, wants desperately to be more dangerous than he is, so when he gets a chance to join some of the "bad" kids from the Alternative School on a nocturnal prank, he jumps at it. That one rather innocuous adventure sets him on a far more threatening course than he ever expected, leading ultimately into confrontation with a deranged murderer.

Guadalupe ("Lupe") Diaz was horribly tortured as a young boy, and now — after a string of killings — he's come to Mike's little town of Bohemia Bay to find his brother, Sal, and exact revenge (he blames Sal for his injuries, since he was searching for Sal when he was attacked). Sal is the neighborhood's most notorious homosexual, gathering about him a troop of willing adolescent boys, and he's the guy Mike and his new friends target for their nighttime harassment. During the fracas, Mike loses the key to his family's new house, and Lupe gets it. Mike doesn't know the extent of the danger, but when one of the pranksters turns up dead, horribly mutilated, Mike feels sure that his loss of the key will lead to disaster. But he doesn't act right away, hoping to find some way to deal with the problem without engaging his mother's wrath.

With Mike's heightened adolescent sense of insecurity and his obsession with losing his virginity on the one hand, and Laidlaw's fascination with the seamy side of suburban California life on the other, *The Orchid Eater* derives its drama from an exaggerated sensibility. As Mike and his friends cower in his family's empty new home, with Sal and his boys pounding angrily on the door and yelling threats, we're caught up in the terror Mike feels, simultaneously worried about what Sal and company might do to him should they get in, and scared about what his mother will do if the house is damaged in the process. "He was waiting for the real destruction to begin.... Death, mutilation, torture.... If they'd caught him outside, it would have been quicker. At least the house would have been untouched." Somewhere we're aware that the real danger is probably not so great — Sal just wants to scare these annoying punks, and how badly could his mother punish Mike? — but we're willing to get caught up in Mike's hyperbolic feelings, enjoying (as he is, somewhere

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inside) the sense of drama and peril.

As with *The Best Defense*, *The Orchid Eater* is a tale of normal people plunged into abnormal circumstances, and like Wilhelm, Laidlaw makes his literary stance clear. Finding himself now in a situation of greater excitement and danger than daily life normally offers, Mike exults. "His veins felt flooded with fear and electricity — in short, with life." The mundane details of Mike's normal existence are not what's interesting, says Laidlaw, and we're going to ignore them for the most part while we get on with the adventure.

Despite the exaggeration and the unusual stresses on the characters — in fact, *because* of them — Laidlaw manages to reveal some striking truths about the more mundane world we all know. His portrayal of Mike is almost embarrassingly honest — his single-minded sexual obsession, idiotic fantasies of seduction, his fascination with anyone he thinks leads a more interesting life than he does, all ring sharply true. Through the figure of Hawk, an ex-biker turned amateur preacher who tries to help local punks avoid some of the mistakes he feels he has made, Laidlaw offers insightful observations about human nature. "Some people had good years the way most people had bad days, years when everything flowed right to them without the smallest hitch; and in such times they appeared perfect saints, wise and compassionate and easygoing.... But the next year could start with a flood, followed by famine and drought...and suddenly your saint would be devouring women and children to keep his belly soft and fat." In other words, only when you expose people to extremes can you see the full range of their potential. Laidlaw demonstrates this principle through Lupe, a normal kid — in fact, a sheltered, introverted, artistic child — subjected to such extreme pain and humiliation that he's capable of any cruelty.

One of the most refreshing things about *The Orchid Eater* is its utter lack of an intrusive moral overlay. Mike is easily likable, but Laidlaw draws the world around him without any implicit commentary. Most of the pranksters are extremely and typically homophobic. Mike's sexual fantasies and the garish, violent sketches he makes portray women as shallowly as any porn magazine (Mike and his friends of course hoard a few hardcore magazines like gold). Sal deals drugs and donates much of his money to youth shelters. Laidlaw never steps in to imply any judgments, nor even to point out that he's not making judgments. This is the world of the story, the context in

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which Mike grows up; think of it what you may.

The Orchid Eater is also deceptively complex and finely structured. On the surface runs an easily followed, suspenseful story, but at times the careful web of resonance and connection Laidlaw has woven can be glimpsed beneath it. One of Mike's friends, Edgar, believes in ESP and other mental powers, and makes offhanded references to Jungian psychology. Subtly, this sets the reader up to recognize the symbolic reading Mike's story invites. Lupe is very much a dark reflection of Mike, in some ways perhaps what Mike could become if his path to adulthood were stunted and twisted. His struggle with Lupe is the struggle within himself, and it's no mere coincidence that once the external conflict is resolved, Mike's internal conflicts subside to a large degree as well.

At one point Laidlaw inserts a sidelong reference to *Beowulf*, and it's not many pages later that Lupe and his attacks on Mike come to resemble the monster Grendel and his raids on Hrothgar's mead-hall. Lupe lives in a cave, haunts the outskirts of town; Laidlaw's description of his psyche echoes that of Grendel: "He'd snapped, seeing everything so neat and perfect that it mocked him. It was a life he would never know.... He wanted to destroy it."

What's most impressive is that these different levels of meaning and allusion enhance the book, but are never essential to its success. You can get almost as much out of it without recognizing the *Beowulf* parallel, or without reading Lupe as a symbol of some part of Mike. The complexities are there for those who enjoy that sort of thing (guilty), but they never get in the way of the basic story.

Finally, *The Orchid Eater* provides a glimpse of another reason why sf writers frequently cross over to mystery/suspense and other kinds of fiction. At the end, the horror passed and a big leap toward growing up made, Mike reconsiders his lurid sketches from his new perspective. "Dragons and sword-fighters?" he wonders with disdain. "Did he expect those to sustain him for a lifetime?" He determines to raise his sights artistically, to try painting, to try to capture an image from reality.

Maybe that's why so many sf writers want to take a crack at something new. They need to grow, too; they need a challenge. And as readers, we ought to encourage them in that, pick up a mystery or a thriller or an historical novel by an sf writer we know. Do *we* expect dragons and sword-fighters to sustain *us* for a lifetime?

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BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

BORN BAD, by Andrew Vachss, Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1994, 272 pages, $11.00, Trade Paperback.

NIGHTMARES come in all shapes and sizes, probably because what scares one person is a joke to someone else. I think it was partly for this reason, because the shape of the nightmare is so subjective, that a few years ago some writers decided to concentrate on the physical effects of encounters with those nightmares and made a point of describing them in gruesome, clinical detail. Often they would get so carried away with this painstaking itemization that they'd forget things like story, character, pacing.

I've scratched my head over the popularity of this sort of material from time to time, wondering if its appeal was really cathartic, as some of its defenders claimed, or if it was simply a sign of the times, yet one more example of a society that seems to spend far too much time chasing ambulances and rubbernecking at accidents, usually vicariously through the media.

I'll tell you what scares me: what people can do to each other. Not mad scientists, or people driven by revenge, or even sociopaths, but ordinary people, the ones who function perfectly normally in general society while cleverly and effectively hiding the twisted side of their nature. I mean the perpetrators of crimes that too many people still think aren't really crimes: spousal abuse, child abuse, the physical and mental torture of another human being, often a part of one's own family, simply for the sake of the power it allows the abuser to wield over his or her victim. These aren't sick people; they're evil. Yes, they were often victims themselves and, yes, what they do is repugnant and it's sometimes almost impossible for the rest of us to conceive that they could do it, but I can't accept it as a sickness. Once they cross the line between impulse and

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the deed itself, they mark themselves as evil creatures, pure and simple, and must be treated as such — not as sick people who can be "rehabilitated."

Perhaps no one understands this quite so well as children's rights activist Andrew Vachss, and certainly few have depicted it as powerfully as he does in his fiction — particularly in the short stories and plays that make up the collection *Born Bad*.

Vachss was one of the prime movers behind the "Oprah Bill" — the National Child Protection Act which was recently passed by Congress. He is a practicing NYC lawyer who uses his fiction to educate the public about the predatory monsters that hunt among us, often raising their own prey, and much of the income generated from his fiction is channeled back into his practice because most of his clients — some are only infants — simply haven't the wherewithal to hire a lawyer.

I mention all of this not to blow Vachss' horn — although someone should; he certainly doesn't do it himself — but to point out that this is a man who puts his money where his mouth is. What Vachss will say about his fiction is best summed up from the few lines that conclude his introduction to *Bad Blood*: "Writing isn't my work, it's an organic extension of that work. I may not be a good writer, but I write for a good reason. And if that reason isn't apparent by the time you've finished this collection, I didn't get the job done."

I'd quibble with the line "I may not be a good writer." It's rare when you can have a writer with such a specific purpose in mind as Vachss has who doesn't come off sounding dogmatic and preachy in the pages of his work. But the thing about the stories Vachss tells is that he does such a good job as a writer (with his characterization, his spare prose, his storytelling ability that is as complex as the real world, yet as simple and universal as myth) that his readers often don't even realize that they're getting a message.

They are — one hopes — incensed at the bleak portraits Vachss paints and frustrated with the injustice that lies all around the characters. They will — one hopes — carry that with them when they confront instances of the same in the real world and then, rather than look away, will speak up and/or act. But they don't realize the message as they're reading the books — or rather, they don't realize that they're being given a message. And anyone who thinks that's an easy task has never tried to do it.

Born Bad is an excellent intro-

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duction to Vachss' work. It contains both reprint and original material — sf from his *Underground* series, a couple of plays, a number of stories featuring his continuing character "Cross," and dark contemporary folk tales of the underside of society. The stories are told simply, startling in their brutality at times, but with only as much detail as they require. Much of the horror found in his work readers actually provide for themselves, their imaginations filling in what Vachss has merely implied, because he never panders to the rubberneckers, bless his heart.

Except for the stories from *Underground*, Vachss's work, strictly speaking, isn't sf, fantasy, or horror. But the setting and characters will be as alien to most readers as if they were set on another planet — which some might think New York City is, especially the parts of it that Vachss explores in some of these stories; their mythic underpinnings speak to Everyman; and the darkness in them is more profound than in most horror novels.

Highly recommended.

END OF AN ERA, by Robert J. Sawyer, Ace, 1994, 240pages, $4.99, Paperback.

Robert Sawyer seems to have this thing about dinosaurs. True, his first novel, *Golden Fleece* (1990), was a murder mystery set in outer space, but he quickly followed that with his "Far-Seer" trilogy, an unabashedly enthusiastic exploration of what sort of a society would have arisen had dinosaurs evolved into the dominant species, rather than we monkeys. One could almost be forgiven thinking that his most recent book is more of the same.

Instead it's a stand-alone novel entirely unrelated to the trilogy, except for Sawyer's painstaking research into dinosaurs and his aforementioned passion for the same. This time out he tackles the idea of time travel, sending two researchers from the early twenty-first century back to the end of the Mesozoic Era to find out what really killed off the dinosaurs.

This storyline alone would have been worth the price of admission — from his research-based speculations into what the researchers find, to their having to deal with the less than ideal conditions of their equipment. Their trip, coming hard on the heels of yet another recession, isn't a priority for anyone except for other scientists, so they're stuck with having to beg and borrow, if not quite steal, the necessary equipment. All of which puts a very human spin to

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what could have been the usual high-tech flash of this sort of story as they're forced to make do with electronic gear from Radio Shack, Sears and the like.

But Sawyer doesn't stop there. A few chapters into the main story, he abruptly switches to one of the researchers reading his own diary of the trip — except he has no memory of having made it, nor is there any physical record that the voyage had ever been planned, little say undertaken. Add that mystery to some great puzzles that the researchers encounter in the past and you have a wonderful evening's read.

Sawyer tells his story with that same sense of fun and adventure that sf had in its so-called Golden Age. The difference is he writes from a modern sensibility and his speculations are based on solid research rather than making things up as he needs them, so really, what we're getting here is the best of both worlds.

SUMMER OF LOVE, by Lisa Mason, Bantam Spectra, 1994, 384pages, $12.95, Trade paperback.

Lisa Mason has a different take on time travel. Where Sawyer uses it to have some fun — albeit he is serious in his speculations on dinosaurs — Mason uses time travel to explore the sensibility of the sixties and environmental concerns. On second thought, perhaps there isn't that much difference. These days, true hippie culture is as much a dinosaur as those behemoths that once roamed the world, and part of Mason's thrust is to explore how it died off — was dying even as, to all intents and purposes, it appeared to be in its heyday.

Her time traveler, Chiron Cat's Eye in Draco, has his origin in our own far future. He comes to San Francisco during the Summer of Love because that summer in 1967 is a "hot spot" on the time line. Something happens during those few months that has repercussions throughout the centuries until, in Chiron's own time, data is mysteriously disappearing from his people's data banks. He's been sent to stop it.

His mission begins with trying to track down a young woman named Starbright, his only clue a film clip from the CBS news. But finding her is only a part of the problem. Once he's found her, he has to protect her from danger until the "hot spot" closes.

Starbright — we learn well before Chiron — is actually Susan Stein, a fourteen-year-old runaway from the suburbs of Cleveland who arrives in Haight Ashbury to find herself. Much of the story is from her point of view, as well as that of an older woman

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named Ruby who befriends both Susan and Chiron. Ruby is an old beatnik who has made the natural transition into hippiedom as did many of the beats at the time, and her take on the scene is particularly fascinating.

The story progresses from there and is quite engrossing as the fated summer unfolds and we experience the group dynamics between the three and various secondary characters. But there's more to the story than the (fairly) linear plot line. Mason is using *Summer of Love* to explore present day environmental concerns as well as old hippie culture. Her extrapolations of how the future will turn out are firmly based upon the present misuse of the world's resources, and while she doesn't beat the reader over the head with her message, she makes a good case for the three R's: reduce, reuse and recycle. Unfortunately, she's probably preaching to the converted because one's interest in this book is undoubtedly directly proportional to one's sympathy to the counterculture as it rose up during the sixties. I don't see the culprits responsible for the present state of the environment running out to buy this book.

That said, I have to admit (my age showing), that I found *Summer of Love* to be a clear-eyed look at the past, rather than one warped by the rose-colored glasses of nostalgia. Her characters are captivating and I enjoyed the stream-of-consciousness style of writing that opens many of the chapters as well as the clippings and quotes of the times that are interspersed with the main body of the text. She's managed to capture both the innocence of the hippie culture and the streetwise cynicism that eventually brought it down.

Summer of Love is a far cry from the hard-edged cyberpunk sensibilities of her earlier novel, *Arachne* (1990), but I happen to consider that a good thing. There's nothing more tiresome than an author continually rewriting the same book, and that's certainly not the case here. Mason has given us an enchanting foray into the near past, as seen through the eyes of the people of its times as well as through the eyes of an individual from our own all-too possible far future. In that sense it's both a history lesson and cautionary tale, but one that doesn't forsake the first tenet of good fiction: there's an entertaining story at the heart of it all.

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When Dave Smeds finished his recent novel, Piper of the Night *(an expansion of his story "Goats," which appeared in the anthology* In the Field of Fire *edited by Jeanne and Jack Dann), he discovered that he had internalized the voices of the Vietnam veterans he had interviewed in a way he had not intended.*

"Their need to express what they went through had become my need to do so," he writes. He turned that need into a short story about life, living, and the persistence of memory.

Short Timer

By Dave Smeds

DEWITT DRAGGED HIS BOOT out of the sucking, red mud. Half a klick to the LZ. Boone was still alive.

Boone. Of all the squad, DeWitt would rather have carried out anybody else, but that didn't matter now. Boone was who was left. So Boone was who he'd try to save.

Boone moaned, wiggling, trying to walk. Dirty but intact skin showed through the rips in his fatigue pants. The rifleman's legs were still good, if he could only stay coherent enough to make them work. But the unfriendly fire was closing in again, so DeWitt carried the man, no matter how much it made him stagger through the elephant grass.

"Perimeter's just past that line of trees," DeWitt whispered, spitting the words out between quick, sharp gulps of air.

The line of trees lay lost somewhere in the vegetation and the dripping wet shadows of the night. DeWitt could not have seen it even if an illumination round had gone off straight overhead. But he knew it was there. He knew Boone needed to hear that it was there.

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One guy, DeWitt thought. Dear Jesus, let me bring back at least one guy.

"I'm short," Boone mumbled, his eyes rolling aimlessly in their sockets. "Forty-three days 'til I get my papers. Captain said he might send me back to the rear next week, let me work with the ARVN until my tour's up."

"That's right," DeWitt said, keeping Boone talking. "Think of next week, man. They got refrigerators in the rear, Boone. The beer is *cold.*"

Boone laughed, licking his lips as if he were already tasting the brew.

AK-47s blistered the jungle about five-zero-zero meters to the right. DeWitt adjusted Boone's weight across his shoulders and kept moving. Speed was everything now. Boone was losing too much blood. And if the NVA didn't know exactly where the Americans had run, they'd figure it out soon enough. The two grunts couldn't stick around.

DeWitt wheezed. His knees groaned as the path took an upward turn. The incline slowed them, but its presence was a good sign; it proved they had found the hill. The LZ was at the top. Still secure, said that last transmission, before Welles had stepped on a mine and sent himself and the radio to hell. Still able to bring in the medevacs.

DeWitt had just glimpsed the line of trees in the moonlight when a long, turbulent rattle issued from Boone's throat. DeWitt lowered his burden to the mud. Boone didn't move. His eyes, glassy and pallid, looked at the stars as if some type of salvation waited there.

DeWitt pulled down the rifleman's eyelids. He would be going on alone.

Again.

He fished through the bloody fatigues until he found the laminated photo of Boone's girlfriend. The night turned her portrait into amorphous blotches of white and gray, only vaguely female. On the back was her address, written in Boone's fifth-grade penmanship. DeWitt pocketed the photo and left Boone behind.

With only his own weight to support, DeWitt could have moved quickly. But he merely slogged up the hill. The small arms fire faded to a distant, staccato drumbeat. Mist rose from the ground, hiding the roots and decomposing leaves, muting the edges of the jungle night.

DeWitt sighed. The humid air took on a life of its own, negating the sounds and sensations of Vietnam. Gradually it brightened, picking up a purplish tinge. DeWitt kept plodding forward.

Purple Haze all in my brain...

The jungle disappeared within the mist. The air clung like a wet rag, ripe with the taint of ozone. DeWitt's body itched. The veneer of sweat, dirt, and

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other people's blood evaporated from his skin, taking his clothes as well. One last step, and the haze itself vanished. DeWitt stood naked in the middle of a bathroom in a suburban tract home. On the wall above the toilet hung a calendar that read August, 1983.

His reflection confronted him from the mirror. The image was far from the infantryman he'd once been. Gray dusted the temples of his finely kinked, receding hair. His basketball-player physique carried two dozen extra pounds around the waist. The tattoo he'd acquired in Saigon barely showed anymore against his dark skin.

DeWitt Langdon, Accountant. Age thirty-nine. Vietnam was a million years gone.

But in his hands, he still held the photograph of Boone's girlfriend.

He turned it over, smearing the fingerprints on the back—the blood was that fresh. Reading the address, he wondered how many times the woman had moved in the fourteen years since Boone had written the information down, how many times she'd changed her name.

Cradling the photo in his palms, he threaded through the house to his garage. He pulled a metal storage bin from under his workbench, opened it, and laid Boone's memento inside.

He sighed. With a bone-weary tread, he made his way to the bedroom. Wanda was awake.

"Trouble sleeping?" she asked.

He tried to relax as she rubbed his shoulders. "I'll be fine."

"You've been so preoccupied lately," she said, worry creating a valley between her eyebrows. "Thinking about the wedding?"

He took her face between his hands and lifted her mouth to his. "Never you worry about that," he said between kisses. "You're the woman for me, no doubt about that. Ain't your fault I can't sleep."

"I thought I'd cured your insomnia," she said impishly, caressing his balls with her fingernails. His scrotum contracted, skin tightening around each hair follicle.

"Maybe I need more therapy," he said. He rolled her onto her back, reached for a breast, and found the nipple already rising to greet him.

"I'm going to Safeway today," Wanda said. "You think a five pound ham is enough? That teenager of yours will probably eat like a horse."

DeWitt tried to update his mental image of his son, but his mind wouldn't accept the revision. The picture would metamorphose back to the

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diaper-clad toddler he used to bounce on his knee and take to the park. Rudy had truly been his kid at that age, not the barely glimpsed figure seen on certain holidays and for a couple of weeks each summer. His ex-wife claimed she never meant to deny DeWitt his chance to be a father, yet taking Rudy to live nine hundred miles away amounted to the same thing.

But now Etta's second marriage had gone sour. DeWitt was engaged to Wanda and had a steady job. "He needs a father right now," Etta had said — her idea, of all things. And though the boy might be hardly more than a stranger, DeWitt had instantly agreed to take him.

"Better get a ten-pounder," DeWitt told Wanda, with a twinkle in his eye. "My family knows how to eat."

They discussed more details of Rudy's welcome-home party. Only six days to go — DeWitt could hardly believe it. They talked until it was time for church.

At the services, it seemed every pew held another friend. Never had the Virgin in the stained glass window smiled down more kindly. Yet DeWitt was restless sitting on the polished wood. He kept turning to the wrong pages in the hymnal.

A trace of purplish fog slid by the window. DeWitt would see it out of the corner of his eye. When he'd turn, the view would be clear, but he knew what he'd seen. His breathing deepened, and his palms itched, like a hunter who has a four-point buck in his sights, but hasn't yet pulled the trigger.

Fourteen years he'd lived with that adrenaline kiss. When he'd been too poor to buy food, the Purple Haze had fed him. When he didn't have four walls to call his own, he'd always had a place to go. Even the morphine he'd taken for his shrapnel wounds hadn't possessed such a siren call.

He didn't know why the haze was appearing so frequently. Usually many days passed, sometimes weeks or even a month. But lately it had been hiding in the background almost everywhere he went, and right now his gut told him that before the day was over, he'd cross the threshold again.

When it came, he was ready.

The Purple Haze always led DeWitt to the same spot. When the mists cleared, he was standing on a dirt road on the outskirts of a rice paddy. The noon sun hammered on his helmet, turned his gun barrel to a branding iron and his collar to a washrag. Directly in front of him was jungle. Here, ages ago, the original patrol had set out. Here was where the replays had to start. It was one of the rules.

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He blended into the elephant grass. Five steps in, a frog croaked, right on cue. Ten more steps, and he reached the edge of a punji pit, which he avoided. Another twenty meters and the canopy closed overhead. In the shade of a massive teak, he found his buddies.

Grease-painted faces beamed at him. Helmets tilted in salute. And Johnnie, as always, stepped forward, wrapped his thumb around DeWitt's, and said, "Good to see you, brother."

The other bloods had always liked him, but now even the white guys — even Boone — looked up to him. Without DeWitt, none of them would be there, healthy and whole, their clips full of fresh ammunition, the enemy nowhere in sight or hearing.

The first hour was always the most special. It was their gift from the Purple Haze. The rules didn't require them to head out. They could take a nap, converse, think. The choice was theirs.

Zuniga wrote his usual notes to his family. Smith and Brodie obsessively tried to armor-pad the places where they'd taken wounds on earlier replays. But most, at some point, sat and listened while DeWitt described the changes out in the world where time did not hold still.

"Home video," Johnnie said, sighing wistfully. "I'd never miss another Phillies game."

"Pussy hair in *Playboy*," added Morgan.

"The Rolling Stones still makin' records? Damn."

They asked him of things DeWitt had told them many times. Like the parent of small children, he patiently repeated item, fact, and anecdote. They clutched at the information, drawing it to their hearts, trying to make it stick. It did so haphazardly, giving them, at best, a fragmentary glimpse of a future that had skipped them by.

DeWitt wanted to think that their inability to remember was merely because they had not directly experienced the events and changes, but he didn't put much faith in the theory. It was the haze toying with them, with him. The haze made the rules. He could bend them about as well as he could throw a hand grenade with his ear.

All too soon, they rose to their feet. The smiles evolved into nervous twitches and stiffly held spines. The men all wanted to stay right where they were.

The Purple Haze wouldn't allow that, either. They had to go forward, toward the LZ. They had to pass through the ville. They had to reach the fire zone before nightfall. And they had to make contact with the enemy. Other

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details might take a million different tangents, but those basics were set. If DeWitt or any of the squad ignored them, the Purple Haze would come early, pulling DeWitt out and sending the other men back to limbo.

DeWitt sent Morgan forward to serve as point man. The rest assumed patrol formation, lifted their heavy packs to their shoulders, and began the hump to the ville.

The jungle smelled of rot and laterite clay. The humidity drew fluid from the pores of every man in the squad. As they walked, the eyes of DeWitt's buddies lost the knowing depth. He sighed, sad and happy for them at the same time. Soon recall would not be an issue. They were returning to the selves who had originally set out on patrol, back in 1969. They wouldn't remember the replays until the beginning of the next one, though for the rest of the day, they would follow his suggestions with an obedience far more profound than when he had been their plain old squad leader.

If only he could command that sort of obedience at night, when the bullets, mortar rounds, and grenades started to fly.

The route took them across a narrow sliver of jungle and back into cultivated land. Breaking through a bamboo thicket, DeWitt spotted the familiar rows of pepper and rice, with the ville on the far side.

The squad approached the area carefully but openly — this was theoretically Friendly country. The residents put away their farm implements and gathered between their hootches in plain sight — women, children, and old men. The headman, hat in hands, bowed and came forward, swallowing visibly at the sight of automatic weapons pointed at his chest. DeWitt gazed at him as one would look at a longtime acquaintance, and uttered several well-rehearsed lines of Vietnamese, a language he'd not known during his original tour.

The headman's eyebrows rose, but without comment, he waved forward a middle-aged woman. She bowed to DeWitt. He explained again what was needed.

The mama-san gave a nod. Her lips drew back, revealing teeth made dark from long years of chewing betel nut. The expression could not have been called a smile, but it denoted consent, however grudging. Business was business. She called out in a raucous voice. A young woman came forward and bowed. The latter was small, her breasts mere bumps beneath the fabric of her pajamalike garments, but her eyes betrayed her worldliness.

DeWitt nodded his approval. At the mama-san's burst of orders, the young woman disappeared into a hootch.

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"Reggs." DeWitt waved one of his men forward. "Got a job for you."

Reggs had barely arrived In Country. His nostrils twitched nervously as he strode up, obviously concerned that his sergeant had singled him out.

DeWitt whispered in his ear.

"You want me to do *what*?" Reggs's eyes went wide.

DeWitt took Reggs's weapon, and tilted his helmet toward the drape over the doorway. "You got fifteen minutes. You think you can figure out the details?"

Reggs gaped like a fish. DeWitt waited calmly. The older man already knew the outcome. No doubt on the original patrol, Reggs would have been too much of a Fucking New Guy to realize the stakes. But it was early in the replay. Some part of the greenhorn private knew what he was being offered. This was not an opportunity to waste.

"The girl will help you out," DeWitt said. "Go do America proud, boy."

The squad spread throughout the ville, glances roving swiftly from here to there, fingers inside trigger guards, safeties off. If any of them found the circumstances odd, they didn't reveal their doubts. DeWitt gave the mama-san the money and leaned back against a stack of woven baskets, just outside the hootch containing Reggs and the whore.

The villagers dispersed, pretending to return to their tasks. DeWitt kept his glance down, preferring not to think of what these conservative rural folk must think of the intrusion on their morality. It was one thing to look the other way when the mama-san took a selected few of the village's young women to work the shantytown near the military base. It was a different thing entirely to have a transaction occur in their midst, at gunpoint. Though they didn't show it, he knew an anger was burning behind their placid eyes, fuel for the Viet Cong cause. Had this been the original patrol, DeWitt would never have provoked them so.

But no shots would be fired inside the community. The villagers might all be VC. Snipers might have every last grunt in the crosshairs of their scopes right now. But both sides would save the bullets. Later, out Beyond in the jungle, after night extinguished the sun, there would be plenty of time for gunpowder, for lead, for principles.

Sounds leaked through the thatch of the hootch — little sighs of feigned female pleasure, amazed grunts from Reggs, and slapping, wet echoes of flesh meeting flesh at a frantic pace. Slowly, the tense lines in DeWitt's forehead faded to smoothness.

The noises were a balm. For five years, through countless replays,

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DeWitt had seen Reggs die too young. Finally, DeWitt had realized what kind of bargains could be made with mama-san. Though he had yet to learn how to save Reggs completely, at least now when the mortars or the grenades or the punji pits took him out, the rifleman died a man.

"Hey, G.I.," said the mama-san, startling DeWitt. " Numbah one girl you? Ownnee two dollah."

She gestured at another of her charges. The woman was a nut-brown beauty, slightly older than the nymph currently seeing to Reggs's needs, with hips wide enough to handle a big man like DeWitt. She shyly turned away when she realized he was watching her — a cultivated but effective bashfulness.

DeWitt frowned. What was happening here? He'd never been offered a girl of his own before. That hadn't occurred in 1969, and it was not something he'd tried to make happen on any replay. If he had, he would have staged it differently — the offer would not have been made in unrefined, pidgin English, for one thing.

"No," he told the mama-san. He willed the goodtime girl to vanish. But she remained, rich with the aroma of female sweat and betel-nut on the breath. He could hear her murmuring to the mama-san, and though his command of Vietnamese was inexact, he could have sworn they were discussing ways to make him linger.

Reggs's voice rose in a huff-puff-ahhh and trailed away. DeWitt tapped his foot on the hard-packed clay until the beaming young man lifted the drape and stepped outside. "Move out!" DeWitt announced instantly.

The jungle waited, as threatening as ever. That hadn't changed.

NIGHT CAME, and so did the NVA. The trees were suddenly full of them — just like the first time. The skinny devils had bunkers dug and claymores wired, they had mortars set up, catwalks strung in the upper canopy. They were *ready*, and no squad of American grunts, no matter how well led, stood much chance against them.

DeWitt chose the strategy that had worked the best in the recent past. He divided the squad into three groups, and sent the other two into areas he knew would draw the worst fire. With four men, he traced a long, circuitous route toward the LZ. He gave them one absolute rule — don't shoot, no matter what. Gunfire always drew the wrong kind of attention. By silent running, they could avoid contact for many klicks. One of these times, they'd

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make it far enough.

Sometimes the men resisted. Sometimes DeWitt had to wait until the shit started coming in from all sides before he could gain their cooperation, and by then it was too late. Little of what he ordered them to do followed regulations. He had learned the words to convince them only through long, bitter trial and error. Once night fell, they remembered nothing at all of the other replays.

This time, it worked. He, Johnnie, Zuniga, Boone, and Smith glided through the bush, packs left far behind, listening to the firefights where their buddies had become pinned down. The only time they entered battle themselves was when DeWitt took out a sentry with his bayonet.

He had never chosen this exact combination of companions. He always kept Johnnie with him if he could, but seldom brought Boone — only the memory of the last replay prompted him to do it now. Most of all, he regretted the absence of Welles. He hated being without an RTO. But more than once, the noise of the radio had betrayed the plan, and humping the equipment slowed the entire group down.

He realized his mistake when the rumble of aircraft began to shake the trees. Someone had called for air support.

"Down!" DeWitt shouted.

The rumble became a roar. Abruptly, branches evaporated off the trees behind them. Soil fountained. Hot lead cut a track through the jungle and right through the small knot of soldiers, like a giant's scythe, come to harvest. Puff the Magic Dragon breathed.

The ringing in DeWitt's ears drowned all other sound. Spitting grit, he lifted his head from the mulch.

The top half of Johnnie's body lay near him. Near the gory remnant lay Boone's head and possibly one of his arms. DeWitt choked and rolled to his feet, turning away. He staggered to the other two bodies. They were more intact, but just as dead.

His face contorted into a painful rictus, but he didn't cry. After all these years, he had no tears left. The channels in his heart that carried his frustration, his anger and sense of loss, were so deep now that the emotions poured like a flashflood through him. He shook his fist at the sky, kicked the ground, and it was done. The familiar stench of despair rose up in a viscous mass, entered him, and dissolved all real feeling.

He stumbled off into the jungle. He didn't bother choosing a direction. Any route he took led to the same place.

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* * *

At some point, as he plodded along, eyes half-closed and mind numb, the surface beneath his feet changed. He looked down. Linoleum. He was standing on his kitchen floor.

Three muddy footprints lay between the refrigerator and the sink. The tread marks were distinctive — the characteristic spoor of combat boots. They came from nowhere. They led nowhere. Yet there they were.

DeWitt lifted his foot. The bottoms of his shoes contained not a speck of mud. And he was wearing his Sunday loafers, not boots. His gun was gone, too. And his fatigues. And the leeches.

He sighed. Moistening a sponge, he cleaned the floor. Wanda wouldn't want a mess waiting when she got back from the pizza parlor.

As he rinsed out the sponge, he noticed a tiny sliver of bamboo. This he kept, taking it to the bin under his work bench. He put it beside the photograph of Boone's girlfriend.

The bin contained a melange of strange objects: The chain from a set of dog tags. Four spent cartridges from an M-16. Several tins of C-rations. Leaves from a number of tropical plants. A rabbit's foot. An annotated copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A locket containing an ersatz daguerreotype of Smith's girlfriend.

Sometimes, DeWitt would open the bin and sit for hours, stroking the rabbit's foot — that had been Johnnie's — or sifting through hand-written notes, memorizing the addresses, imagining that he might make use of them again.

Excuse me, ma'am, I have a message from your son.

My son died in Vietnam.

I know, but he gave me a message for you.

Sometimes they believed the communication really was from their son. Sometimes they shouted into the phone that DeWitt had better never call again or they'd tell the cops. He never tried to explain how the duty had fallen to him. If they asked, he said he'd carried the word for years and neglected to pass it along.

He especially remembered Johnnie's mother, crying in relief to hear that Johnnie knew who his real father was, a secret that she had always been ashamed she had never told him before he left for Vietnam.

The Purple Haze had done good things. Knowledge, mementoes — he'd brought these things back. He could do that if he stepped in the right places, took the right turns, and made it as far as the LZ. How else had he survived

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the first time, if not for the luck of a step here, a turn there? One of these days, his buddies would be as lucky as he. They'd cross the threshold, alive. All he had to do was keep going back for them. Jesus Almighty had given him a gift. He meant to use it.

His daddy had taught him, when he was young, a man doesn't abandon his people.

THE HAZE clung to the horizon as he rode to work Monday morning. DeWitt saw a violet plume in his rear view mirror, rising from a factory smokestack. But there was no smell of ozone, no sense of shadows walking. DeWitt's fingers drummed on the steering wheel, anticipating the cold kiss of a trigger guard against the calluses.

He worked that day listening for the whine of malarial mosquitoes. That night, Wanda's body against him pressed with the heat of a Southeast Asian noon. The orgasm she gave him brought only partial relief. A summons stretched like a tripwire across his path, waiting for his blundering foot.

By midday Tuesday, he jumped when his supervisor suddenly appeared around the partition of his work cubicle.

"Langdon, could you come in for a minute?"

DeWitt set down a sheaf of invoices and stood up. As always, his boss didn't wait. DeWitt caught up with him at the threshold of the executive suite.

"Close the door behind you." The older man took his seat behind the desk, and waved for his employee to sit in the guest chair.

A trickle of sweat stained the back of DeWitt's starched cotton shirt. If this were about daily business, his boss would have had him lean over the desk, to view whatever material he was working on.

"Can you guess why you're here?"

DeWitt swallowed. "Sorry, Mr. Sawyer. I'm afraid I have no idea."

Sawyer pulled a linen handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his bifocals. The pale puffiness under his eyes exaggerated his owlish, half-blind stare. His stern look was so at odds with the words that followed that DeWitt had to repeat them in his head:

"I've decided to give you a promotion."

DeWitt blinked twice. "Wh-what?"

Sawyer coughed. "I must say no one was more surprised than I at your good work, young man." His voice squeezed the last two words out; as if

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sensing too late that to call a man near forty young was unnecessarily dismissive.

DeWitt said nothing.

"I'm not the sort who likes to admit he's wrong, DeWitt, but I thought I ought to be straight with you." Sawyer tapped his pen against his desk blotter. "I only hired you because of affirmative action. Oh, you were qualified, yes, but so were ten other guys. You got the job because you were black."

One of DeWitt's scars itched. Not any of the ones from 'Nam. The old scar, from childhood.

"You knew that, didn't you?" Sawyer stated.

DeWitt flushed. "Yes." The only surprise was that the man was saying it out loud.

"I thought you might. I know I must not have been friendly, at first. It was never anything personal. I just don't like regulations telling me who I can and cannot hire."

"I understand," DeWitt mumbled.

"You wouldn't have lasted ninety days here if you hadn't done your job. I thought you should know that. Maybe you'll understand how much thought I put into this promotion. It's strictly my idea. You've worked hard for me for two years, DeWitt. That's what counts. Not some quota bullshit." Finally, a smile blossomed on Sawyer's face, bringing into view bright teeth and grandfather smile lines. " I'd meant to do this at the end of the quarter, but I decided to move it up a bit. Your new salary is effective with this paycheck. Call it a wedding present."

The acid in DeWitt's stomach slowly changed to alcohol, as he realized the man was not joking. "Th-thank you, Mr. Sawyer," DeWitt whispered.

He said other, inane things, but registered none of them in memory. The next he knew, he was back in his office. His heartbeat was just returning to normal. He sagged back in his chair.

And guffawed — deeply, from the diaphragm. Was it his imagination, or had the weather turned less muggy? He sighed, unable to wipe the smile from his lips. Too bad Wanda wouldn't be back until evening. He wanted to call her.

He pulled a cigar out of his desk drawer — saved ever since Tony down the hall had become a father last winter. He lit it, and let the smoke drift lazily toward the ceiling panels.

The smoke took on a purplish tinge.

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Abruptly DeWitt was on his feet. To his surprise, the smoke changed back to blue gray and fled up into the ceiling vents.

Not until Friday did the haze call him. There it was, hung like a shower curtain across the office foyer, as he reached for his keys to lock up — he was the last to leave, having worked late in an effort to show how seriously he regarded his new responsibilities.

He viewed the threshold with slumped shoulders. On Tuesday, he had been fresh, prepared. By now, he was beaten down not only by the wait, but by the rigors of a long work week. But he made his feet cross the carpet. He strode through, tasting the ozone.

The road, the rice paddy, the blazing sun greeted him as always. Then his eyes narrowed in surprise. The path had shrunk to a mere fold in the elephant grass. Not that it had ever been a prominent trail — soldiers learned not to leave such traces. But this time the way looked neglected, almost as if feet had never trod upon it.

DeWitt reconnoitered. Instantly he ducked into the elephant grass and flicked off the safety of his M-16. To his left, in the distance, he saw someone.

The figure was a teenage Vietnamese girl. Wearing a pair of Guess jeans and a white T-shirt, she sat at a tiny stand marked LEMONADE.

DeWitt's scowl deepened. This was not normal. This should be against the rules. The Purple Haze had shown him many sides of unpredictability, but they had always made some sort of sense in context.

His head ached fiercely. Lifting the helmet, he rubbed his forehead, all the way up to his receding hairline.

Confused, DeWitt pulled his hand away, as if stung. In 1969, he hadn't been the least bit bald. He stared at his palm — the creases were deeper than they should be. Closing his eyes, he shook his head, and when he looked again, his hands were smooth and youthful. He touched his head. The hairline was where it was supposed to be.

"Sarge? Sarge?" whispered a voice.

DeWitt jerked his head up, recognized Boone's whiny, nasal tone, and said, "On my way."

Boone was at the far side of the punji pit, with Zuniga. DeWitt gestured for them to move ahead of him, and soon they came to the shade of the huge teak, its trunk looped with vines. The rest of the squad waited in the usual places.

Johnnie came forward, thumb offered. "Good to see you...brother," he

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said, with an odd hesitation. "Tell us about the world."

He sounded as tired as DeWitt. In fact, he and the others had been sounding tired for many replays now, DeWitt realized. It seemed normal now, yet there had been a time when the whole squad had brimmed with hope and vitality each and every time they set out.

DeWitt sat and talked for the one precious hour the Purple Haze allowed. This time the squad sat in a circle, to the last man, listening carefully, offering little or no comment. The words poured out of DeWitt's mouth, so fast he didn't even take time for his usual half dozen cigarettes.

And again, the hour expired. Again, all too soon. As he stood up, his knees afflicted with a strange, rheumatoid stiffness, he knew this replay was going to end early, far short of the LZ. The men all had death peeking through the membranes of their thousand yard stares.

But he led them on — through the bush, to the bamboo thicket, to the pepper field, to the ville, to the fire zone.

DeWitt tumbled across the floor of the foyer and slammed into the glass door. Fortunately it was tempered glass, reinforced with wire — it did not break. DeWitt sagged to the carpet.

Shit. He hadn't ended a replay that way in years. The grenade had landed among them, leaving him and the other two surviving men — Morgan and Ramos, this time — barely time to recognize it for what it was. Then the explosion hit and that was that. Instantly, he was back in 1983. The receptionist's clock rotated another digit. As always, he'd been gone no more than a few seconds, as far as the present-day world was concerned.

Shaking, he retrieved his keys from the floor, locked the offices behind him, and made his way to the parking garage. His hands were still unsteady as the attendant waved him out and he rolled out onto the street.

A few blocks later, as he entered a residential zone, he saw a lemonade stand on a corner. A slim Vietnamese girl in Guess jeans and a white T-shirt was just closing up shop for the night.

DeWitt's relatives began to arrive Saturday morning. Not that there were many, but it didn't take large numbers to fill DeWitt's modest living room. DeWitt planned to find a bigger home once the wedding was over and Rudy had settled in at his new school.

Wanda wouldn't let him go to the bus station to pick up Rudy. She

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insisted that father and son's reunion should be complete with all the bells and whistles: audience, applause, a cake and balloons, good food — a real party. DeWitt let her have her way.

And he was glad. It unnerved him to stand eye-to-eye with his own offspring, who scarcely had a right to be so tall so soon. The celebration and the company filled in what would have been awkward silences.

Rudy liked chocolate cake. He didn't like coconut. Just like DeWitt. He liked baseball, was indifferent to football. Just like DeWitt. By the end of the meal, it was no stranger seated across the table.

"Care to sit with me for a while on the porch?" DeWitt asked his son while the dishes were being cleared.

"Sure."

It was August. It was muggy. But to DeWitt, no place in the whole of the United States had as miserable a climate as what he was used to, and he settled comfortably on the step.

"Like it here so far?" DeWitt said. He wasn't usually so direct, but God knows, he'd had few chances to talk with own flesh and blood.

"I guess so," Rudy said, shrugging with a teenage boy's classic indifference.

"Your mother used to say you'd hate to live with me."

"Mom used to say you were crazy," Rudy said bluntly.

DeWitt coughed. "Hell. She might've been right."

"She said you were never the same after you came back from the war. Is it true that you were the only survivor of a patrol?"

DeWitt wiped the smooth crest of his forehead, lips pursed. "I was."

He'd never told anyone the details of that night. But somehow, it felt right to speak now. Slowly, with precision, rendering the graphic parts with a steady voice and just the right sprinkling of euphemism, he told how the squad had been isolated from the rest of the platoon. He described how unexpected the sheer number of enemy in the vicinity had been. He told how, one by one or in pairs, the men with him had died, and how he, peppered by shrapnel, had crawled to the landing zone and been loaded onto a medevac chopper.

He told the real story. He mentioned that Johnnie had tripped a claymore, that Smith had been caught in friendly crossfire because DeWitt was too confused to give good orders, how Boone had died cursing him for a dumb nigger for going out instead of waiting out the day and night in the elephant grass beside the road. Their mission had been search-and-destroy.

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Well, they'd searched, and they'd been destroyed.

Not once did he offer an alternate picture. In many of the replays, most of the squad had survived three-quarters of the way to the LZ. In others, Johnnie had died a hero. And in just about all of them, DeWitt hadn't been such a stupid fuck, because repetition had taught him strategy and erased his personal disorientation. Rudy heard none of that, because DeWitt told only the truth.

Finally, mouth cottony from the long talk, he picked up a lady bug that had crawled onto the porch and pretended to be absorbed examining its markings. "But all that was a long time ago." He didn't want to turn, for fear he'd see the glazed look he'd seen so often on people back home whenever anybody mentioned Vietnam.

"I've been wanting to hear about it," Rudy said. The boy's voice was full of interest, not boredom.

DeWitt clapped his hand down on his son's shoulder. "Then...we'll talk about it again. We ought to have lots of opportunity, now that you're here."

Rudy nodded. "That's for sure."

DeWitt's uncle, Hosea, limped onto the porch, aided by his hickory cane. How DeWitt had respected that cane, once upon a time. "Rutherford, your grandma wants to chat with you a spell before she leaves," Hosea announced.

Rudy went inside, waved on by DeWitt. Hosea lingered by the doorway. The screen door clattered shut, muffling the babble of the family dinner.

Hosea cocked an eyebrow, a knowing look on his grizzled, former mechanic's features. "He's going to stay."

DeWitt nodded. His glance rose to a cloud formation up near the zenith, just visible under the eave.

Hosea chuckled. But then, instead of returning to the party, he sat down on the edge of the porch with his nephew. "You know, if I don't miss my guess, I'd say your life's doing about the best it's ever done for you, right here this summer."

"That's the truth," DeWitt said.

"Then why ain't you acting happy?"

DeWitt looked down, and saw that his uncle was making a joke. The old man didn't realize how startling the question had been. *Because that cloud up there is turning purple,* he might have answered, had it been a serious remark.

The cloud waited for him all that night. He heard it breathing up in the

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sky long after Wanda had fallen asleep beside him. He saw it out the window as he, Rudy, and Wanda sat at the breakfast table the next morning. Though the sun had long risen, the billows retained the hue of earliest dawn.

"I'm going for a walk," he said at noon, while Rudy was gone to fetch a new headlight for the car.

The cloud descended as he ambled down the street, as DeWitt knew it would. The mist slid into an alley and waited, reeking of ozone. When DeWitt reached the alley's mouth, it oozed forward. Two steps later, the cement beneath him turned to hard-packed clay, red and wet and steaming in the heat. He kept walking.

The path's beginning was gone. He knew the spot only by the surrounding landmarks. He stopped. The equatorial glare flashed from his bayonet to the glossy green leaves and back. The jungle hummed with its familiar, welcoming sounds. He did not attempt to move forward.

He searched for the Lemonade girl, but she was gone. Near the same spot, however, he saw a clearly defined trail, marked with whitewashed cobblestones. A sign beside it read, R&R.

His stomach felt as if fire ants had taken up residence within it. He sat down in the center of the road, drew a deep breath, and waited. He nearly drained his canteen, enduring the open sun, before the elephant grass swayed and parted. DeWitt's best buddy emerged, deep shadows under his helmet.

"Hey, DeWitt," Johnnie said. "What's keeping you, brother?"

The words formed a mass in DeWitt's throat. He had to speak them, or swallow them, one or the other. If he didn't, they'd choke him.

"I got my papers. I'm going back to the World."

Johnnie nodded. The shadows would not clear from under the helmet. DeWitt could see only darkness—black skin against a fuliginous canvas. His buddy had no eyes to make contact with. "We know," Johnnie said, with the voice of a man who has seen the bullet with his name on it. "We been feeling this day coming for a while now. Congratulations, Sarge."

DeWitt lost his grip on his rifle. It fell onto the rutted mud of the road. "I'm sorry, Johnnie. I've got things to do now, other places to be."

"Forget us, motherfucker," Johnnie said with conviction. "You should have erased us from your brain a long time ago. You think it's easy, dyin' a thousand times?"

A thousand times, a thousand times. "Shit," DeWitt said, his tongue tasting as if it had been dusted with iron filings. "Johnnie, I never —"

"Don't sweat it, man. We all wanted you to try. At first. But there's only

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so much tryin' a man can do."

Johnnie stepped back, and with the grace of a well-trained soldier, faded into the elephant grass as if he'd never been — a ghost in its element. He left behind only a cloud of gnats and the dank odor of the rice paddy. And a cool draft of something very much like forgiveness.

DeWitt turned, kicked the clay from the soles of his boots, and took the new path — the only path left visible. Around the first stand of trees, he came to a ville. Around the first bamboo hut, he entered a city of stucco, wood-frame houses, and lawns. In a few more steps he was once more striding along a sidewalk of his neighborhood.

He stopped and looked back. A last wisp of Purple Haze climbed toward the sun and evaporated.

Wanda met him on the steps. They went inside, and talked about where to send Rudy to school. That night, DeWitt Langdon slept deeply. Fourteen years behind schedule, his tour had ended.

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Canadian writer Urs Frei's first professional appearance was in our March 1993 issue with his story, "Mrs. Molton's Mr. Molton." This time, he returns with a humid, quirky story. "The Godsend" has the feel of the British colonial writers, but the themes in this story are very contemporary.

The Godsend

By Urs Frei

IN THE ONE-ROOM TERMInal the heat was intolerable. An air conditioner resting in a window licked at the pavement outside with a tongue of rust, while its blackened vents inside made one surmise an ancient rupture. The attendant was a black man in gray dungarees, small and hard, as if kiln-dried in the line of duty. He seemed oblivious to the heat, and confirmed placidly that the air conditioner was out of order. Fortunately noon was still an hour away, and on the west side, the runway side of the terminal, was a strip of shade wide enough to wait in. Half an hour later, when it had shrunk by half, the attendant came out to confirm that the plane would be late, and at that moment Arthur Nkobe savored the unusual clarity and certainty of his premonition that everything would become much worse before the day ended. This would only be in keeping, after all, with the general deterioration of things since his arrival from Khartoum two weeks ago to administer drought relief in the southern Sudan. He had found awaiting him in Juba a suite of air-conditioned offices, a well-prepared staff — but no supplies. The

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French, British, and Americans had promised aid, but the French supplies had never left Paris, the British supplies were lost among shipments to Ethiopia and the Sahel, and now the Americans, instead of aid, were sending their own administrator to decide how it should be distributed.

He was affected strangely by the heat. Several times already he had been sure that he could see the plane; twice he had turned to his assistant, Cecil Deng, to point it out, only to find when he turned back that it had disappeared. He was so affected that he felt no embarrassment; he felt only now and then winds of irritation. He had no one to vent them on, and Cecil was too experienced to give him an excuse. Cecil wore a frown of concentration and held his head cocked toward the six Dinka chieftains conversing, several yards away, in their even, musical and slightly female voices. Arthur Nkobe was irritated again, since his assistant, who had been hired primarily as an interpreter, hardly understood a word of what they said.

And yet he was a Dinka himself, his name originally Kiir Jal, and could be distinguished from the chiefs only because his suit happened to fit. He had moved north when he was a child. Arthur Nkobe could not decide whether Cecil's unease in their presence meant fear or contempt, or something of both. Certainly he had been taken aback to find that for this meeting with the representative of *America* the Dinka had decided to wear suits. Perhaps they embarrassed him, but to Arthur the tall slender chieftains with their prominent bones managed in their innocence, in spite of the sleeves that came halfway up their forearms, not to look ridiculous. But he did not understand why, with their people in such a plight, they had made the effort to be here. Cecil Deng could only shrug.

The plane appeared at last out of nowhere in the middle of the sky, and in a minute landed on the runway in a cloud of heat and stopped a hundred feet away. A door opened near the front. Two black men struggled with a ladder which they hooked onto the doorframe. The ladder swayed as they came down one-handed, carrying luggage in their free hands, and at the bottom they made adjustments to fix it to the tarmac. Then the American, a white man, appeared in the door. He was so large that Arthur Nkobe wondered for a moment if he were seeing two men. Cecil Deng snorted with astonishment. Nkobe held his breath until the American had reached the bottom, for the plane seemed to sag as he climbed down. The American stood for a minute in the shadow of the plane, panting. The Dinka had become

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silent as he descended. Then as he began to cross the tarmac their voices rose in alarm and they set out in his direction. When they had reached him one of them took off his jacket and all six held it up as a screen for him to walk under. Arthur Nkobe shook his head at the sight of the stately, comical procession. Cecil, when Arthur caught his eye, could only shrug. At the terminal door the American shook their hands.

"David Johnson," he said. "Call me Dave. Now get me out of this damn heat, will you?"

In the restaurant of the European hotel all three air conditioners were turned to full. Their noise made conversations at other tables inaudible and gave an air of imminent disaster to the normally placid interior, with its paneled walls, Parisian lampshades, and portraits of the contemporary European monarchy. Arthur Nkobe and Cecil Deng waited at one of the tables for David Johnson to finish washing. They discussed the Dinka languidly but without broaching what was still puzzling them.

The American had changed into loose white cottons which slightly disguised his corpulence, and sat down with a sigh. He was astonishingly, almost pitifully ugly. Whatever expressiveness his face might have had was lost in fat; the shape of his mouth reminded Arthur of the head of a fish he had once been served in a hotel on the Red Sea. His eyes in contrast to those of the fish were almost invisible. He wore a gold ring embedded with diamonds, and so embedded in flesh that the very idea of trying to remove it was unpleasant. His voice was smaller than himself and seemed condemned to eternal complaint.

"Another one of those damn places where you can't get a proper shower," he said.

"Water rationing," Arthur Nkobe said. "We're — "

"Oh please. Don't tell me it's different any other season. Where did you go to school, Oxford or someplace?"

"London."

"For some reason all you people go to Oxford or Harvard or someplace like that. God am I hungry. Service!" he called, turning as far as he could. "Where did that waiter go?"

As they awaited his meal the American recounted the horrors of his journey: six hours delay in Cairo, the incompetence of immigration officials

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in Khartoum, a plane that should have become scrap iron twenty years ago. He was served a full chicken and two plates of vegetables, and while he ate, nimbly dissecting the chicken, he did not speak, seemed to have forgotten that he was in company and to be unconscious of being watched. Whenever he looked up Arthur Nkobe would glance pointedly at his watch, but the American seemed not even to see him but to be gazing within and savoring the unison of his internal organs. At length when he had eaten everything, he covered his mouth and said:

"Those six men — those chieftains — do they always do that kind of thing? With the jacket."

"No."

"Now I don't mean to seem suspicious, you understand, but did you put them up to it?"

Arthur Nkobe smiled faintly. "That would have been difficult."

Johnson nodded. "I want to meet them this afternoon."

"I'm sorry, I thought you knew. They have already gone home."

"I see." Johnson stared at him without expression and Arthur wondered what he was thinking. "Now I don't like to throw my weight around," the American continued, and Arthur could not help smiling, "but I think I should make it clear that I've been given full authority over the distribution of American aid. So — " he sighed — "if things don't go as I say, there won't be any aid. I also have to tell you that over in America there's a new philosophy concerning foreign aid, and that is: help people until they can help themselves. Now I happen to know that you've got quite a little piece of swamp here, which I guess isn't any use to you, and I happen to represent some investors who'd like to see a little tobacco come out of that swamp. Do you follow me? You've already got a canal half built to drain the thing, what's it called — "

"The Jonglei."

"Jonglei canal. It's a disgrace." Arthur Nkobe nodded, though he knew the disgrace Johnson meant was that it had never been finished, not that it had ever been undertaken. "As I understand you have the single biggest machine in the world sitting there rusting away." He shook his head, and the way his lips came together conveyed deep sorrow. "Our plan is to feed your natives, put them to work, and put that machine to use. The aid is the first step, but we aim to see that they never starve again."

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"By turning them into good American niggers?" said Arthur Nkobe mildly.

The American seemed to see him for the first time. Then he shrugged and looked away.

"I'll need an air-conditioned jeep for four days starting tomorrow. I'll need a translator. I want a good sidearm and some ammunition — they kept my Colt in bloody Khartoum. I plan to tour the canal site and visit a few of the tribes."

"You should not," said Cecil Deng suddenly. "Many are holding feast days. They will have no outsiders."

"Feast days?" said Johnson sharply.

"Yes."

"These people are about to starve and they're holding feasts?"

"Oh yes. Yes."

The American shook his head. "No. No. I'll put a stop to that."

"I think it would not be a very good idea for you to visit them at this time," said Arthur Nkobe softly, feeling that it was futile but that he had to say this much at least.

"They've never held a suit jacket over *you* have they?" said the American, rising from the table. Arthur Nkobe shrugged.

The next day was filled with work. He let Johnson have Cecil Deng as his guide and translator, and after seeing them off in the morning Arthur Nkobe returned to his office and applied himself to a mound of neglected paper. There were letters and telegrams from London, Paris, Khartoum and Addis Ababa which required tactful yet pointed replies. This took the whole morning, for he could manage well enough in English but was terrified of even attempting it in French; on top of this someone had misplaced the French dictionary. At lunch he met for two hours with officials of the Red Cross, who smiled sympathetically at his description of Johnson. The rest of the afternoon he wanted to spend composing letters to New York City and Tokyo, but found himself distracted by a thought which after the meeting had begun more and more to impose itself upon him: that the American and Cecil should not have gone without him. Repeatedly he made the same arguments, managed to soothe his conscience with the same extremely valid excuses. But in the middle of the afternoon and a letter to the Japanese foreign ministry

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he stopped working and began to pace behind his desk.

He thought, At least I should have tried harder to change his mind—*even though* it would have done no good, he added to himself ahead of the voice of his reason. And slowly he began to realize that what distressed him was that behind that voice was hiding another, an obscure and secret reason, the result of which was that he had not *wanted* to go or *wanted* to change Johnson's mind. He thought of the Dinka chieftains holding the jacket over the American's head, and felt cold and sick.

But eight hours had passed since they had left, and evening was approaching. The nearest tribe was a hundred miles away, and although there were two other jeeps, Cecil Deng was the only man he could trust to guide him at night. Nothing could be done until morning. He thought briefly of asking the Red Cross to send a helicopter, but wouldn't they think his reasons were absurd? And what if they were right?

But he could not assure himself. He had no appetite that evening and later in his hotel room could not sleep. After midnight, while it was still some distance away, he recognized the roar of the jeep, sprang out of bed and reached the lobby before it had pulled up to the hotel. Cecil Deng was alone. They met on the front steps and in the dim light he tried to interpret Cecil's expression—he thought he had never seen one like it. Cecil held up between his thumb and forefinger a large gold ring embedded with diamonds.

"They would not let me into the feast," he said. "But they said to keep this." He was trying to keep from laughing. "Mr. Johnson was very surprised."

Arthur Nkobe stared. Cecil's face was contorted, and to his dismay, and although he managed to show nothing and make no sound, but imagining vividly the American's surprise, he found himself struggling against his own desire to laugh.

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Carrie Richerson's previous appearances in F&SF *have earned her Campbell nominations for the Best New Writer of the year. Since then,* Amazing Stories, Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine, *and* The Year's Best Horror Stories XXI *have also published her short fiction.*

Although she is known for her dark fantasy offerings, Carrie has a deft hand with science fiction. She proves that with "Artistic License."

Artistic License

By Carrie Richerson

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura...
—Dante, *Inferno,* Canto I

THE CLIFF FACE WAS GIVING me trouble. I teased out another curl of the stiff, brittle basalt — stretching, stretching...and winced in pain as it snapped back on me. Damn. I rubbed my aching head. Serves me right, my old art school professor would have said. *Patience, Antonia, patience!* he would chide. *You must work with the material, not against it.* Yeah, right.

My theory, on the other hand, has always been, If at first you don't succeed, try a bigger hammer. I visualized a *very* large hammer. WHAM! Shocked grains aligned and surrendered themselves to pliability. That's more like it, I thought as I pulled the rock, no more resistant than thick taffy now, into a tube shape.

Of course, this "taffy" was part of several hundred thousand tons of cliff,

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and any mistake on my part would bring it all thundering down around my sunburned ears. Or fuse my ganglia into lumpy porridge if I lost my focus. I slapped away a mosquito the size of a small hummingbird, pushed my sweat-spiked hair back out of my eyes, and worked my way with intense care along the row of basalt columns, hollowing some into tubes, leaving others in their natural state. When finished, if I did my job right, my olympian wind flute would be indistinguishable from the natural cliff face — until the wind blew. Then it would yield everything from soft whistling to organ thunder — and maybe the voice of the god herself, in a really big blow.

The prospect of that caliber of sound rattling my client from his bed some night was almost enough to make me cheerful. I had nothing against Lane Forrestal — except that he was rich, handsome, privileged, and had about as much aesthetic sensibility as the rock I was goosing. He'd hired me to transform a square mile of northwest Georgia hills into a pocket Tahiti — and he was giving me free rein to embellish the project any way I wanted. Fine. For as much money as I was charging him, he could have his ecological joke — and I'd indulge a little whimsy of my own. Forrestal had wanted the best landscape Artist in the world; he didn't even flinch at my price or my stipulations. It didn't help my opinion of him that he'd been so aristocratically *nice* about it.

I was halfway along the cliff when the back of my brain began to itch. I knew without turning around that my audience was back. Every day for the last week, she'd been watching me from the veranda of Forrestal's mansion. She must have had more than a touch of Talent herself for me to be so sensitive to her presence, but she wasn't trained and didn't know how to shield herself. She probably wasn't even aware she was leaking, but I couldn't afford the distraction. I had hoped she would lose interest after a day or so, but it was clear now that I would have to have a talk with her, whoever she was.

I stabilized the cliff and shut down. I needed a break anyway. My back and knees ached and my sweat-soaked clothing was plastered to me and itched in all the most inconvenient places. Georgia in July was not as hot as my home in the west Texas desert, but the humidity was like a huge, wet, panting dog sitting on my shoulders and slobbering down the back of my neck. I'd been working on this project for three months now, I'd fallen into hyacinth bogs, been slapped in the face by rhododendron branches, stumbled

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through briars and poison ivy, been bitten by leeches, ticks, and coral snakes — and it was still the humidity that I hated the worst. I was starting to mildew in the thick terpene haze that smothered the forested hills every day.

One of the estate's small army of gardeners was watering a coleus bed under a nearby oak, so I stepped into the shade to see if he would let me drink from the hose.

"Yes, ma'am," he said politely, handing it over. I've been called many things in my life — bitch, monster, whoreticulturalist (that last was quite inventive, I thought) — but "ma'am" was a new one for me. While I rehydrated he mopped his streaming face with a bandana and tried not to let me catch him staring. Pity and curiosity warred in his face, and curiosity won. I was glad it wasn't pity. I hate pity.

To distract him from his inventory of my physical defects, I jerked a thumb in the direction of my observer, not caring if she saw. "Who's the old lady?"

He looked pained at my failure to show a hireling's proper measure of respect. "That's Mr. Forrestal's great-aunt, ma'am. She visits him every summer, says it's cooler here than in New York." New York must be Hell, I thought. He continued, "Miz Holzman — Beatrice Holzman. Perhaps you've heard of her, ma'am?" The mild sarcasm might have been his revenge for having to consort with a mutant, but he was richly compensated by the stunned look on my face. He took the hose back from me, chuckling, and moved off to water another bed, leaving me to contemplate my doom.

The Beatrice Holzman? No wonder Forrestal had money to burn. And the woman who had replaced Croesus as the standard by which the culturally illiterate measured wealth, had taken an interest in me. Oh my. It is complications like this that keep soaking the rich from being the painlessly profitable profession it should be.

My mood grew fouler as I stumped up the terraces to confront her. Steps are not easy on my twisted, four-and-a-half-foot frame. Holzman watched my approach with an effortless stillness. It was obvious she was used to waiting for people to come to her. It must have been only a question of how long it would be before I took the bait.

She didn't flinch away from my appearance, and her face didn't take on that frozen look of a person trying not to betray disgust or horror. I couldn't see her eyes behind her dark glasses, but the tiny movements of her head told

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me she was studying me from top to bottom. My father used to say that my face was a map of his Italian birthplace: the Tuscan Apennines of ropy tissue curving across my left temple, the wine-dark stain spreading across my right cheek the Ligurian Sea, the Arno splitting my face like a scar, and Florence, beloved Firenze, in the middle. He liked my nose. I let Beatrice Holzman explore the map of my face while I studied her in turn.

Before age had stooped her, she had owned the raw-boned height and sturdiness of her sharecropper's heritage. Her frizzy white hair was gathered under a floppy sun hat, and she wore long sleeves, even in this heat, to cover the pale blotches on her arms. Large, gnarled hands, showing a tracery of blue veins against the faded mahogany skin, clasped one another quietly in her lap. Her face, like mine, was a life-map. Deep wrinkles creased the drooping cheeks, and her nose, as hooked as a harrier's beak, was crooked by some old injury. That chin had never retreated, that jaw had never known surrender. There was nothing beautiful about the face that had graced the covers of dozens of financial and news magazines, but no picture could convey the sense of power that radiated from her.

Then she took off her sunglasses, and I was ambushed. A web of fine wrinkles, as delicate as the crazing in dark, old porcelain, netted twin chunks of improbable frost-shot blue, edged with green — like one of the icebergs Frederick Church so loved to paint. The effect was one of simultaneous clarity and depth, something I'd like to capture in a landscape someday. Maybe a great sculpted glacier....

I never had a chance. I think I fell in love on the spot.

A lifetime's practice in reading people, augmented by her trace of Talent, must have told her of the effect she was having on me. The crow's feet around her eyes crinkled; it was the only sign of her amusement, but it was enough to break the spell. I snapped back into myself and felt my face grow hot with anger and embarrassment. She wasn't the only control freak on that veranda; I *hate* feeling that vulnerable. I glared my resentment at her and turned to leave.

She stopped me with two words: "I apologize." She didn't sound like she had much practice at apologizing. "Please forgive my bad manners, Miss Ligeri. I sometimes forget there are ways to deal with people other than manipulation." What did she want so badly that she was willing to be so humble? Or was the humility just part of the manipulation? I turned around,

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curious and wary. "I have a business proposition to discuss with you. Will you sit?"

Someone had thoughtfully provided a footstool to help me into the adjacent chair. I sat. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Maybe *that* was Holzman's Talent: to convince people that her ideas were their ideas. Simple. Effective. I summoned all my defenses and sat there as prickly as a hedgehog.

She didn't waste time offering me a mint julep or iced tea, or asking my opinion of the weather or her great-nephew. With the same calm assurance with which she had conquered Wall Street and the Bourse, she got right to the point.

"I wish to commission you to do my Portrait, Miss Ligeri. I am prepared to pay you ten million dollars."

I smiled and relaxed. Forrestal was only paying me five. Ten mil is a lot of pocket change to kiss off, but all I felt was relief. My tone was positively cheerful as I replied, "Sorry, Ms. Holzman. You have me confused with some other Artist. I don't do Portraits — just Landscapes..."

"I have done my homework on you, Miss Ligeri. We would not be having this conversation otherwise." She sounded disappointed that I would think her such a novice. "Years ago you did Portraits that were world-famous. Then you stopped. I want you to do one more."

One more or a dozen — it didn't matter. The great thing about the past is that it is *past*. I stood up. "Not interested, Ms. Holzman. In your money or your commission. Good day." Outraged dignity is difficult to telegraph with legs as short as mine, but I gave it my best shot as I turned my back on the icebergs and stalked back to the tropics.

A BLUE-GREEN LAGOON and sandy beach to reinforce the tropical island illusion. Twin hundred-foot waterfalls splashing down one end of my basalt cliff, creating a perpetual rainbow in their combined sprays. Behind one waterfall, a grotto spiraling in upon itself like a stone nautilus, to end in a slender chimney that climbed through the rock into the bowl of an ancient cinder cone, which formed the "island's" backbone.

I melted the bones of the hills and made them flow from *here* to *there*, straightened a crooked valley, rerouted drainages. Day after day I slogged through the heat and the sucking red clay to realize Forrestal's tropical vision

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and nail solid a reputation for myself that should keep me in commissions for a long time. Forrestal might have more money than sense, but I had a local monopoly on hubris.

It took a lot of hubris. Also patience, sweat, the occasional blood and tears, and a singularity of concentration that left me limp at the end of each day. If Forrestal's kitchen staff hadn't sent dinner to my cabin every night (I'd refused a suite in the plantation-style mansion), I might have starved to death.

One July night I sat on the porch of my cabin, too tired to eat my moussaka, too tired to get out of the chair and go to bed. Heat lightning flickered to the west, but overhead a full moon blazed down on Forrestal's estate, silvering the lawns and terraces. Moths battered themselves against the screen door, avid for the light I'd left on inside. The dizzying sweetness of the honeysuckle and gardenia clotted the damp air, and a raucous choir of cicadas almost drowned out the surf of conversations and laughter from the Big House. Forrestal was throwing a party. Make that a *Party*. I'd been invited, of course. I'd declined with what I thought was an admirable amount of civility, considering that I was sure I was only invited so Forrestal could show off his resident Artist.

I drowsed and watched lightning glittering in the distant clouds, and the earthly glitterati — the rich, the powerful, the celebrated — circulating from ballroom and dining room to terrace and veranda. They clumped, twined, separated, recombined — the dance of the social genome to the silent but compelling strains of power, wealth, and sex. And Forrestal would have thrown me into that septic stew, to see what mutations I would catalyze. Ugh.

A soft knock on the porch rail roused me. "May I join you, Miss Ligeri?" Beatrice Holzman stood at the foot of the steps. "I brought you something." She waved two glasses and a decanter half-full of something palely golden.

I laughed, charmed in spite of myself. "Come on up." I moved my unfinished dinner from the small table at my elbow and brought another chair from inside. If I drank I wouldn't be able to work the next day. "I'll drink with you, but don't think you can bribe me with single-malt scotch."

Beatrice nodded approvingly. "Don't worry — I only offer bribes when I know they will work. My nephew has excellent taste in liquor, if not his guest list. I was bored. I hoped you might still be awake."

My sleepiness had vanished. She poured, we clicked glasses. "Your

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health, Ms. Holzman."

She was dressed in something quietly elegant and very expensive, and I blinked when she slipped off her shoes and put her feet up on the porch railing. "If we are going to drink together, you must call me Beatrice. And how shall I address you? Antonia?"

"Tonia."

"Then, Tonia, you should know that at my age — I am ninety — health is relative. But thank you for the thought."

It was more than a thought. I'd taken a peek as soon as she sat down — it's a reflex. She was in very good condition, the result no doubt of being able to afford the best medical care money could buy. But diagnostic imagers have their limitations: I had already spotted two incipient malignancies in her upper colon. With the same reflex I started to reach in to destroy them, then stopped myself. Too dangerous in my exhausted state. Anyway, they were unlikely to cause her trouble anytime soon.

We listened to the cicadas and whip-poor-wills without speaking for a time. The liquor was smooth, heat without fire, and I felt more relaxed than I had in a long time. Beatrice wasn't trying to bribe me; she was using her Talent to disarm me, to break down my defenses.

As if at the thought, she refilled our glasses. "What is it like, Tonia — having that power?" They always ask, eventually. They can't help it.

"You should know. There is nothing I can tell *you* about power. You've bought the power to make more change in the world than I'll ever accomplish. But that's not the question you really meant to ask."

"It isn't?"

"No. What you really want to know is what is it like to be me. To be a freak." My control techniques aren't as subtle as Beatrice's, but they work.

Except on her. She was silent for a moment, but when she spoke there was neither pity nor shame in her voice. "Is that how you think of yourself — as a freak?"

I felt an attack of mulishness coming on. "No, sometimes I think I'm the only *normal* person in a world of unTalented, obscenely attractive giants!" Bitter, bitter. Who died and left my heart so bitter?

The genuine amusement in her laughter banished self-pity from the map. I should not play poker with someone better at it than I am. The cost of losing could be too high: my wary independence, my fragile dignity. My

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heart. I did not want to lose my heart to someone just because she treated me as an equal.

It was part of her strategy, I reassured myself. And with the thought came another, blooming through the alcohol's glow. "You arranged all this, didn't you?" I waved at the dim bulk of my creation, crouched like an immense beast at the foot of the lawn. "An *audition*, dammit!"

"No. That might work with another Artist, but not with you." She was calm in the face of my anger. "Lane's Landscape was a convenient coincidence. I merely made sure he knew that you were the best Artist to be had. His ego did the rest." She looked toward the mansion, her face unreadable. "I haven't told him about the Portrait yet."

She turned back to me. "I'll admit that I've enjoyed the chance to watch you work, but not because I needed any assurance of your competence. From the moment I decided to have my Portrait done, I knew who I wanted to do it. I've met many of your subjects — Sabrina Herzog, the young du Pont, the Baroness Kreusze. You are the best."

She said it as though she thought she was entitled to the best, but I've seen money do that to people. *Was* the best, you mean. There are a half-dozen hotshot Portrait Artists out there now who might be better than I ever was. They'd love your commission. And your money." This time I refilled the glasses.

"Why did you stop?"

"I thought you said you'd done your homework."

"I know that one of your clients died. A daughter of some minor European nobility. The inquest ruled death from natural causes — a heart attack. Why did you blame yourself?"

I'd spent years trying to put it behind me. Now it felt like something that had happened to someone else. But if it happened to someone else, why did it still hurt *me* so much? "Marthe Gault-Sauvage. Her family wanted to pretty her up, marry her off to some prince charming. No one bothered to tell me about her congenital heart condition." They didn't have to; I'd spotted it on her first visit.

I must have been drunk by then; I'd never talked about it before. "A Portrait puts a lot of stress on the body." True. "Her heart couldn't take it. She arrested and there was nothing I could do but call an ambulance." Not exactly true. "I was responsible for her death, no matter what the coroner said."

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Now *that* was the truth. God help me, I'd been trying to fix that very congenital condition when she started to fibrillate. I'd worked frantically, but everything I did just made that twitchy muscle spasm harder. Of course, I didn't tell the coroner that. A little ventricular fib; a big dead lie.

Marthe might have been homely in her parents' and her own eyes, but to me her face was full of kindness and laughter. I'd liked her. And then I'd killed her, whoring my Talent out to the quest for cosmetic perfection. And I, of all people, should know better.

I had forgotten Beatrice was there, until she spoke. "So. A tragic accident, yes, Antonia Ligeri." Her tone was as dry and pitiless as my desert home at high noon. "And for that accident you have turned your back on the best part of your Art. You have trusted neither yourself nor your Talent. Now you play with mud pies. It is safe enough, I suppose. But you can do better."

You shall know the truth by how much it hurts. And by how angry you get when you hear it. I stood up, fast, the alcohol burning a blue "TILT" in my brain, and slammed my glass down on the table. *"Leave. Now."*

Beatrice didn't move. She held my gaze with those incredible eyes for a long moment. I looked away first. "Do you want me to call a doctor?" she asked calmly.

I looked down. My glass had shattered; a long shard jutted all the way through my palm, and blood and spilt whiskey covered the table top. Only when I saw it did it begin to hurt.

"No." I took a deep breath and reached for focus through the liquor and my roiled emotions. In just a few minutes I had blocked the pain, stopped the bleeding, and started the flesh healing itself. The glass backed its way out, the cut closing behind it.

I tossed the bloody splinter onto the table. God knew what the kitchen help would think when they came for my tray and saw that mess. I refused to care.

Beatrice had watched it all without comment. I tried for a little more dignified exit. "Thank you for the whiskey, Ms. Holzman, but I think I've had enough. Good night." I let the screen door slam behind me and fell across the bed. I didn't hear her leave.

The next day I was too hung over to work, but what the hell — even the gods took a day off once in a while. I could follow their example. I slept in.

* * *

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A complete replacement of the local vegetation; rhododendrons transformed into hibiscus, Carolina jessamine and poison ivy coaxed to adopt the genetics of bougainvillaea and orchids, tall pines persuaded to stoop to adopt their new crowns of palm fronds. A vegetable excitement swept the area as more and more plants got into the spirit of the game. DNA strands unraveled and reknit themselves. Overnight an entire hillside of mixed temperate scrub would convert with religious fervor to jungleism.

And through it all, the threads of my whimsy, private jokes on Forrestal and his "art as something to hang over the couch" mentality. The black and white sands on the beach looked random, but from the air the pattern resolved into the kanji character for "mysterious island." The ever-smaller rooms of the spiral grotto were baffled with polished plates of stone that turned the thunder of the waterfalls into a conversation that was always just on the verge of making sense; in the chimney room, a madwoman whispered to herself. A lake of scarlet bird-of-paradise in the extinct volcano's caldera. Fanciful bird houses extruded from the living limbs of trees, saplings laced into lovers' bowers, tiny crenelated castles built for ants.

Daily my hunger for home thickened like a taste on the back of my tongue. Finally, on the last day of August, I regarded my work and lo, it was good. On the highest point of my wind flute cliff, I smoothed a patch of rock and signed my creation: "A.E. Ligeri," in deep, angular strokes. Time to quit.

I collected my last payment from Forrestal and picked up my gear. Beatrice came to see me off. "The answer is still *No,*" I said before she could ask. She didn't try to argue, just smiled and wished me good traveling. A face like black velvet, a voice as slow and soft as the hyacinth bogs. I didn't want to admit, even to myself, that I was going to miss her.

Home. Mutie go home.

THE COMMERCIAL flights were the usual humiliation: attendants who patronized me with soulless courtesy, passengers who stared, or worse, made a point of not staring. The damned, disgusting pity in their eyes. I pulled a blanket over my head and pretended to sleep between flight changes.

My parents were honeymooning on Cyprus the summer that Israel finally lost all patience with the guerrillas of the Bekaa Valley and started the Six-Hour War. The wind was from the southeast. My parents were doubly

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lucky: they got out fast and the doctors told them their exposure had been minimal. It should have been okay for them to have children.

If I had been born in my mother's native Greece, I might have been left on some hillside as an offering to the gods. In America my parents weren't allowed that option. Neither was I. Some days I am not properly grateful for the miracle of my existence.

But it could have been worse. Nature, that most mischievous of gods, indulged *her* ironic whimsy in linking the physical malformations to psychokinetic Talent. The more severe the deformities, the stronger the Talent. So those of us who have been born with some variation of this mutation, who owe our origins to Damascus and Chernobyl and Comanche Peak, to ozone depletion and heavy metal contamination — we are compensated. And, in the end, we will have the last laugh: It's a dominant mutation. We breed true, and there are more of us every year.

In El Paso I picked up my plane from long-term storage and headed east. Only when I had climbed above the mutagenic goo that El Paso-Juarez calls air did I begin to relax. I could feel the bone-dry, superheated air shriveling the Georgia mold in my pores.

I hadn't filed an accurate flight plan, and I turned off my plane's transponder before I banked south at Balmorhea. Every time I do that the FAA threatens to ground my ass, but I grease enough palms to keep my file relatively clean. The same passion for privacy makes sure that my mountain home appears on no map, my access codes are unlisted, and the old-fashioned mailbox down at the unpaved country road carries my mother's name, "Eleutheria." No one has gotten the joke yet.

A last tight turn among the weathered limestone reefs of this ancient sea, and I was home. Home to my desert, patient and forgiving of my absences, like an indulgent lover. Here I have found refuge from the casual wounds of a careless public. And here I have found the source and inspiration for all my art.

This is the ultimate Art: an utter commitment to the senses. Colors of a subtlety and range not to be believed. Silence that sings in the midnight ear. Bitter waters and sweet rocks, brimstone soil and aggressive plants. A scented night as seductive as the secrets between a woman's thighs, followed by a sun that can pound one into the ground like the hammerstroke of doom. Above it all, the bowl of that vast, engulfing, crushing, weightless sky.

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Better to burn with passion in this inferno, than to rot away in any paradise. And I never, *ever*, do a landscape of the desert. I am capable of recognizing perfection when I see it.

Under a sky the color of radioactive milk, I shook the dust of Forrestal and all his kin from my feet and walked through my front door. Then I slammed it behind me and told the world to go to hell.

I'd been home three weeks and was suffering through my third rainstorm. It wasn't supposed to happen this way; I paid the NOAA meteorological Talent in Midland enough to keep me clear of this kind of climate tinkering. At least I thought so. I could see that my hard-earned Forrestal money was going to have to fund some bigger payoffs.

My mood was so foul that I ignored the doorchime when it first rang, but the prospect of getting to bite off the head of some lost tourist was cheering enough to send me raging down the hallway from my studio. I grabbed my shotgun, a requisite door-prop at every ranch west of the Pecos, to enliven the effect and flung the door open ready to commit murder.

"The desert is very beautiful. I can understand why you choose to live here." Beatrice Holzman stood on the step, under an umbrella held by — could I believe my eyes? — Lane Forrestal. His eyebrows went up at the sight of the shotgun, but he wisely refrained from saying anything.

"The sign on the gate says 'No Trespassing.' How did you find me?" A copter, bearing the emblem of a Midland-Odessa rental agency, sat beside my plane at the foot of the hill. I leaned the shotgun back into the corner before I could do something silly with it, but I didn't invite my visitors in. Being in love has never stopped me from behaving like a bitch.

Beatrice turned from regarding the view down a catenary valley that stretched blue to the end of the world. "I bribed the sheriff."

Arliss Coupland was a wily old coot, even for a west Texas country sheriff. He had been on *my* payroll. He was probably halfway to the Mexican border by now; he knew if I ever caught him, I'd kill him. I remembered what Beatrice had said about offering bribes. She had enough money to bribe the entire state of Texas — to find me, to pressure me, or just to make my life miserable.

But it wasn't the money that made me shiver with the knowledge that I was going to give in. It was the shadow of desperation marring the crystalline

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depths of those eyes. It was realizing that next she was going to beg, and I didn't want to see her lower herself to that. It was understanding that I *wanted* to give her what she wanted. Did it matter if it was Talent or love that compelled me? Was there a difference?

Sitting in a chair in my studio, in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows that pan the entire valley, she looked small, diminished by age, for the first time. "Lane, dear, why don't you wait outside?" she said.

He crossed to her chair and knelt in front of her, gathering her ropy hands in his own manicured ones. "Please, Aunt Beatrice — don't do this." It had the sound of an argument he had already lost a dozen times.

She freed her hands gently and gave him a fond hug. "It will be all right, Lane. Nothing will change between us."

He stood, shaking his head. "*You'll* change," he said sadly. When he turned to go, I saw tears in his eyes. Maybe I had been wrong about Lane Forrestal. Maybe I had been wrong about many things.

I waited until he had closed the door behind him before I spoke. "I have a price. In addition to the ten million. I want you to tell me why. Why you want this. Why now."

She watched raindrops track down the windows as though they were the traces of old regrets. "I'm ninety years old, Tonia. I don't anticipate having much time left in this world. I want to be beautiful for the first time in my life." She turned and impaled me with those eyes. "Is that so hard for you to understand?"

That was a low blow. And a lie. This wasn't really about vanity. She could have bought beauty cosmetic, surgical, or sculptural years ago. I knew what she was running from, even if she didn't, or didn't want to admit it. She had seen to the heart of my secret fear, but she was blind to her own. You can't tell someone that stubborn anything. I should know. I tried anyway.

"I will do this, old woman, but we will both regret it."

She spread her blue-veined hands in her lap, looked at them as though they were suddenly repulsive. "What do I have to lose?" she whispered.

Your nephew's love, I thought. And my respect. But I knew at this point she wouldn't — couldn't — care.

I took the stills and holos I would need for planning — dressed, nude, moving, close-ups, three-sixty pan. Her body had the standard problems one would expect at her age: dowager's hump, loose skin, sagging breast. Left

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only; there was an old mastectomy scar on the right. I could feel the osteoarthritis pulling at all her joints, the background level of pain she lived with day in and day out.

When she was dressed again I handed her a copy of my standard contract. "Read it. All of it. Especially the informed consent form. I guarantee nothing, I am liable for nothing. I'll call you when I'm ready. Have your doctor book a suite at your favorite hospital. We'll do it there."

She looked up from studying the contract. "I want it done here."

"No! The nearest hospital is two hundred miles from here! If you have a heart attack or stroke out on me...!"

"It seems a risk worth taking," was all she would say. I thought of my Macedonian grandmother: a totally different physical type, but the same sense of iron will under the fragility. The sense that even the gods on Olympus couldn't move her once her mind was made up.

I gave in finally, as she knew I would. Lane was silent, his dark face shiny with misery, as they left, and I knew I would not see him again. The rain had stopped; as Lane helped Beatrice down the steep path to the landing strip, the sun broke through the clouds and turned the entire valley to gold. By the next day it would be wall-to-mountain-wall wildflowers. A last spendthrift fling of beauty before winter's cold and the dark.

I lay awake for hours that night, second-guessing myself. Whenever I closed my eyes I saw unraveling double helices, snarled and knotted. We are such complex organisms to have evolved from a handful of self-assembling bipolar molecules. Cells, tissues, organs, entities, environments. System within system within system — incorporated, precise, interdependent. And we just can't stop rearranging the furniture. Look at me. (No, don't.) I, of all people, should know better.

The desert, at least, is content to be what it *is*.

When I went to the bathroom in the middle of the night, a scorpion stung me on the foot. I crushed it. So much for interdependence.

It was late October before Beatrice satin my studio again. I had been right about Lane; a chauffeur had brought her and her physician this time. I had the doctor waiting next door. I wanted him within earshot, but I couldn't afford the distraction of a third party in the room.

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I made Beatrice comfortable in a chair in the middle of the room and warned her that some of what I did would hurt. "Tell me if you're in a lot of pain or if you feel something going wrong. Otherwise, don't chat — I have to concentrate." She nodded. I began.

I permitted myself the invasion of a delicate touch into her subcortex to release a wash of natural endorphins and sedatives. It would blunt most of her discomfort. Then I went to work on the skull and facial structure. A bone spicule stolen here, a plate shaved there, a tendon nudged to a new insertion. Sinus drainages reworked, the nose straightened, cheekbones heightened, jaw softened. A goose to slumbering collagen synthesis and hair follicles. Slack skin started to pull tight and glossy, dark hair sprang in tight curls from the scalp.

I took a break and asked Beatrice how she was holding up. "My teeth ache and my nose is running. Do you have a tissue?" she asked. A real trouper.

I had prepared a cold lunch in advance, knowing I'd need the energy but would be too tired to fix anything. While we ate, a bemused doctor examined his patient and shot me sideways looks of resentment and wonder. Beatrice ate slowly, getting used to the subtle differences in the way her tongue and jaw moved. No one seemed inclined to talk. That suited me just fine.

After the remains of lunch were cleared away, Beatrice and I settled down for a long, hard afternoon. I worked my way down the spine, repairing discs and vertebrae, reversing the ravages of years of osteoporosis. At some point I looked up to see tears rolling silently down Beatrice's cheeks. She must have been in great pain, but she had said nothing. I hesitated, then placed a sensory block high in the cervical cord. She sighed with relief as the numbness washed over her. I handed her a handkerchief and kept on working.

Muscle fibers replaced to restore tone, arthritic joints cleaned and rebuilt with new synovial fluid, slack skin thickened and pulled tight, uniform melanin levels restored, the left breast lifted and a new right one extruded to match it. I took another break and let Beatrice rest.

I wasn't resting, I was wrestling with my conscience and my memories. Everything I had done so far was part of a standard Portrait, though the client was not usually so elderly or the work so extensive. A little fine tuning and I would be done, the contract provisions fulfilled. So far as the world knew.

But I knew how much more I could do, and how much more Beatrice

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could benefit from. No one need know the extent of my powers, even Beatrice. The desperate would not beat a path to my door, seeking miracles, and I would be able to live with myself again. *If*...if I had the courage.

And the will. And the skill. If I didn't kill her on the spot, like poor Marthe Gault-Sauvage.

I told Beatrice she could lie down on the chaise while I did a last few adjustments. When she was comfortable, I reached in and flooded her system with sedatives. She was deeply asleep in just a few minutes.

First the heart. I might as well get the hardest part over with first. I held my breath while I reamed plaque out of each of the coronary arteries, but the contracting muscle kept up a steady, reassuring rhythm. Other things were easier: flushing the liver, repairing the kidneys, vacuuming those malignant polyps from the velvety, twisting tunnels of her intestines. I converted a few normal pancreas cells to insulin-secretors to make up for the normal loss of Langerhans tissue due to age, then spent some time making delicate adjustments to the immune system. When I woke Beatrice, she thought she had just dozed off while I put the finishing touches on her Portrait.

I collapsed with exhaustion while Beatrice stood awestruck before the mirrors. A woman a third of her chronological age, poised on the cusp between dewy youth and regal maturity, gazed back at her. A blue-eyed Queen of Sheba perhaps, after her conquest of Solomon. Many Solomons would be willing to throw themselves at the new Beatrice's feet.

She was giddy with triumph and the tinkering I'd done with her neurotransmitters. It rasped on my raw nerves. I herded all of them out of my house as fast as possible. At the door Beatrice bent and kissed me lightly on the cheek. I felt nothing. Even the imperious eyes seemed to have lost their ability to command me.

She all but skipped down the path; no need now for a steadying arm. The doctor paused at the foot of the path and shot me a look of rebuke. I felt something then, something familiar — shame.

I wiped grit and water from my eyes as the copter took off, then stumbled inside.

It was a while before I could bring myself to touch the money, but I got over that. Eventually I put part of it to good use: a hefty under-the-table sum persuaded the regional EPA administrator to list my area as an "endangered

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climatic zone." I could hear frustrated Meteorologists gnashing their teeth all the way from Midland.

One of the art world's hautest journals received permission from Lane Forrestal to do a midwinter spread on my Landscape. As soon as it hit the media, my agent's phone started to ring, and kept ringing. Much to his surprise, and a little to mine, I turned down every offer. Instead, I took myself to Juneau and spent a month watching the glaciers topple into the bay. I didn't sculpt a single one.

I went home. Waited. Moped.

The desert woke from winter's stillness to a brief spring and an early summer. Still I waited, hope almost gone. And on an April day when heat shimmer boiled off the valley floor in rainbow waves, I received a call from Beatrice Holzman. Would I see her? Of course.

The improbably blue eyes were red-rimmed. They hadn't done much sleeping lately; maybe a lot of crying. "I made a mistake," was all she said. Well. At least one of us had the courage to admit it.

It took me almost as long to restore her to her previous appearance as it had to create the new one. I cheated, of course: I didn't stoop her as much as the file holos showed, or age-spot her skin as much. But I scrupulously recreated the original shape of her head, restored her white hair and wrinkles, re-crooked her nose.

She didn't even want to keep her new right breast, but I argued with her over that. "Dammit, Beatrice, don't be stupid. It's no different from having an implant." For once she let me win a point.

When I had finished, she surveyed herself in the mirrors and sighed. "That was silly of me, wasn't it? Maybe I'm growing senile."

"No," I said. "Just old. And afraid of the dark. Just like everyone else. How bad did it get?"

"Bad enough to bring me to my senses. But only after I'd alienated a number of good friends. Lane and I haven't spoken in months." She studied the face in the mirror again, then me. "You knew. You knew the price I would pay was my self-respect. You knew because you've done this yourself. And that's the real reason you stopped doing Portraits."

The moment stretched out. Her eyes left me no place to hide. Sure, I could make myself look "normal." I did, once. And it improved the way people treated me a thousandfold. But I didn't like what that said about

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them. Or me. So I changed back. And I deal with it.

But you know something? It *never* gets any easier.

A thousand humiliations condensed. Evolution *hurts*, dammit. I could have kicked myself when I felt my eyes start to water. I should never play poker with someone better at it than I am.

She crossed the room and went down on one knee in front of me. Ninety years old, and she was kneeling to put her eyes on a level with mine. A gentle finger traced one of my more violent facial features. She seemed more beautiful now than she ever had when she looked younger, and her eyes had all their old sorcery back. Somewhere in the room a heart was beating, very fast.

"I *did* do my homework on you, Antonia Eleutheria Ligeri. Let us celebrate that ideal of freedom for which you were named. Have dinner with me this Friday. Eight o'clock, my townhouse."

"In *New York!*" I was incredulous. "It seems a little far to go just for dinner."

"Then stay a while, as long as you like. I'm a very good cook. And I know some people you ought to meet."

A dozen excuses flitted through my mind. All of them were irrelevant. She wasn't. I hoped my desert would forgive the infidelity. "Okay." I felt faint, queasy. And something else, something I hadn't felt in a long time.

She climbed stiffly to her feet and held out a hand to me, waited while I found the courage to take it. She seemed pleased with herself, and me. I walked her to the door. The chauffeur was solicitous, but I found myself missing Lane.

Beatrice paused a few steps down the path and looked back up at me. "I have enjoyed a long life, Tonia. I would like to spend my few remaining years with people who interest me. Eight o'clock. Do not be late."

"I'll be there," I promised. I didn't tell her how wrong she was about the time she had left. I hadn't reversed any of the internal repairs I'd made. I'm not *that* kind of monster. She'd have plenty of years — to win back her old friends, discover interesting new ones, make things right with Lane. Maybe even to cook for houseguests from Texas.

The copter wheeled away. I was still feeling shell-shocked. She was

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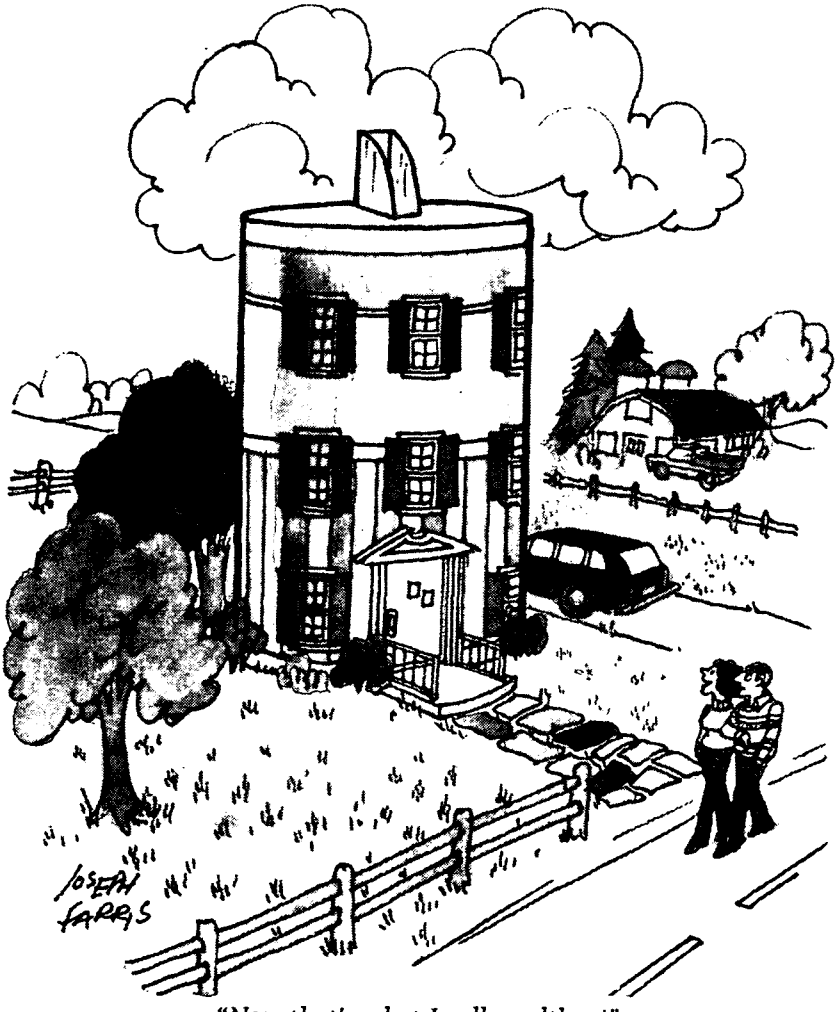
old enough to be my grandmother. Hell, my *great*-grandmother. It was wildly improbable. It was ludicrous.

It was fantastic.

For the first time in forever, I was whistling as I walked back inside.

For May Westrope Stewart, 1890-1971.



"Now that's what I call a saltbox!"

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 48:
In Which the Wee Child's Icons are Demeaned

OKAY; SO you're in the wrong, and you know it. You made a right turn from the left lane at the last corner, and you cut the guy off, and you're embarrassed as hell because you *know* what a feep you've been, and now you spot the destroyer coming around the corner behind you, swelling like a tumor in your rearview mirror, and you think, *Oh boy*, not because you're as much afraid as you are chagrined at having been just the kind of careless, out-to-lunch asshole as *you've* given the finger to.

About a hundred times in the past six years, right?

So this maddened vehicularist pulls up alongside you, and his power window skims down, and he's screaming imprecations and blasphemies against you and yo Mama till these two big pulsing cords bulge out either side of his neck like the pillars between which Samson stood in the Temple of Dagon, eyeless in Gaza, and the motorist fuming along beside you has this demented face all over him that says if he got the chance he'd rain down an entire Philistine temple on *your* head, you dimwitted chunk of semi-human excrement behind a steering wheel, which you shouldn't oughtta be!

Now it looks as if maybe he's going to keep at this thing till one or both of you swerve up and over and enter a Taco Bell not through the drive-in port, but maybe the front window, so in the name of terror and sanity, you pull over or slow down, and you start tugging your forelock in guileless consternation. We're talking major league shriving here. You admit to stupid, you cop to thoughtless, you plead brain-dead, you vouchsafe radical DNA damage all the way back to the Mesolithic, including that embarrassing contretemps involving your ancestor Hoockmuh of the Clactonians which resulted in your being minus a lobe or two of brain, and thus you are truly and genuinely contrite about having cut him off. You drool quite a bit. Also eye-rolling.

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Which calms him some, but not totally, and he keeps at you. No longer homicidal, but still incensed and stoked with verbal inertia, still all puffed up and blowing hard. Like what the great screenwriter Richard L. Breen characterized as sounding off "like a banjo player who had a big breakfast." (I just *love* that phrase.)

There is a word in Yiddish for the way this guy is coming on. The word is *broygess*. It's pronounced something like rhyming with "Boy Gus" who would be, of course, sibling to Boy George. He's all chest and flapping lips. *Broygess*. Fulla hot air and warm owl shit.

My mother, dear lady that she was, had an instant response when someone came on *broygess* with her. The offensive party would run his/her mouth and roll dem eyes, and when a spot was hit where breath had to be taken, my momma would squint at the geek and say, "Woof woof a goldfish."

I'll let that one out again:

She would thrust her head forward and say snappishly, "Woof woof a goldfish." Or maybe it was, "Woof woof, a goldfish."

I grew up with that phrase. I never questioned its accuracy, its efficacy, its logic. When someone was being a strutting and fuming pain in the ass, the only proper response was *woof woof a goldfish*.

I'm not sure I used the phrase very much, because it seemed — in my mind — the property of the late Serita R. Ellison, but yes, every so often, out of me would pop a perfunctory woof woof a goldfish. It never got less a reaction than astonished silence. It never occurred to me that the person to whom I was addressing woof woof a goldfish was anything but stunned into sordine confusion. (Now, in the wisdom of puberty, I suspect that the addressee was simply stumped as to what the hell I was saying. Either way, it worked.)

Many years later, after the death of my mother, when I had occasion to asseverate the phrase (as Hugo winner Mark Clifton once put it), a friend asked me, "Precisely what the hell does that *mean*, 'Woof woof a goldfish'?"

"Or, possibly, 'Woof woof, comma, a goldfish,'" I replied. "Y'know, I haven't the vaguest. My mother used to say it."

So I contemplated for a while, and the best I could come up with... was that a vicious dog would go *woof woof*, and be a potential threat. But if a goldfish went *woof woof*, it would be an empty threat, because what harm could a goldfish do you, even a very large, pumped-up on steroids kind of goldfish who had possibly studied all the Sonny Chiba films and knew a lot of spiffy moves?

That was what I divined. That my mother meant to say to whoever was coming on *broygess*, that s/he was fulla hot air and warm owl shit.

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But the point I'm making here is that I *used* that phrase, and it was precisely what I wanted my message to convey, even though I'd never spent a moment trying to decipher it. And so do you. You have one or more of those. Some phrase that you got from a childhood playmate, or a teacher, or your parents, or brothers or sisters, or off some long-forgotten television show. Some phrase or more than one, that came from ingrained childhood memory, that you never examined to make sure it had the same contemporary meaning for the people to whom you'd addressed it.

Hell, I still say "nekki hokey" from *Dick Tracy* daily strips, and I say "I'm ready for Freddy" from *Li'l Abner* comics, and "in like Flynn" and "What time is it? It's Howdy Doody time!" and when I want to make a sound to frighten someone it's always the sound of that squeaking door from *Inner Sanctum*. Or, to put it a different way, the great writer Lin Yutang once wrote: "What is patriotism but the love of the food one ate as a child?"

That which forms us, unconsciously, as children, informs our opinions when we have crawled through the years to adulthood. And we seldom recognize those forces and phrases that bent and shaped us. So we do the Academic Adagio, the Deconstructionist Dip, the Theosophical Thrash, to rationalize why we love or hate or enjoy or find disappointing some book or movie or comic or tv show. Also some people, whom we accept or reject on the spot, on the instant we meet them, for mysterious "gut perceptions" about Their Manner. (For instance, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, a very fine writer, with whom I cannot remember ever having exchanged an unpleasant word, dislikes me — and these are her precise words — "Because of your manner." There is only one response possible to such a statement, and it *ain't* woof woof a goldfish. She is absolutely entitled to have that opinion, and it's one of the few *rational* reasons for disliking a person, but when she said it to me, all I could think of saying was the retort of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, "Yeah, I get a lot of complaints about that.")

What it is about the way someone presents him/herself tins to a resonance that we hear across the decades. As if formed in the crèche by *Oberstgruppenfuehrer* Nuns who followed to the letter the instructions in the *Clockwork Orange Reader of Child Behavior and Mindwash*, we respond pavlonially to arts and crafts, isms and aesthetics, songs and schemes, right on order, precisely as we have since adolescence, like that robot rabbit who runs the groove at the dog track.

And that is why I must give a lashing to the multimillion-dollar dud THE SHADOW (Universal), which broke my heart, made small one of my greatest childhood idols, wasted an opportunity to bring to the big screen one of the greatest detectives ever conceived by the mind of Man, and in general pissed me off.

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(And you thought I'd never get to the movie part of this, didn't you? O ye of little faith. And by the way, your pants are unzipped.)

You cannot know with what innocence of mind and spirit I went to see *The Shadow* screened. If ever there was an audience stoked to enjoy a film, I was that audience! Come, I cried, come fill me to the top with wonder and mystery and suspense and the endless enigmas that the mere name *The Shadow* conjures.

I'm not one of you Boomers who rattles on nostalgically about how cool it was to listen to "Old Time Radio rebroadcasts" of *The Shadow* programs ten years ago. Listen up, you GenX-come-latelies: the first movie I ever remember seeing, even before *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which was 1937, but I must've seen it at its first re-release in 1940, was Victor Jory as *The Shadow* in the fifteen-part Columbia serial. I came in late to the chapter-play, maybe part three or four, but I remember standing at the back of the old Utopia Theater in Painesville, Ohio, on a Saturday afternoon, holding my father's hand — he'd taken off a half hour from managing Hugh's Jewelry on the corner of State and Main, to walk me up the block to the Utopia for my first moviegoing experience — not even seated yet, waiting for my dad to show me what to do, where to sit, how to act...and looking up at that screen and seeing one of the great American actors in what wasn't one of the great American movies (but, hell, *I* didn't know that), actually live-action moving and doing what The Shadow did in my head as I listened to him every Sunday evening, sponsored by Blue Coal. Whatta rush! I *adored* The Shadow.

Six years old, I'd taught myself to read, and I was spending my allowance on *The Shadow* pulp magazine from Street and Smith, not to mention the comic, which very soon began to feature Shadow art by the legendary Bob Powell. Bret Morrison was the voice of *my* Shadow, and Grace Matthews was Margo Lane. Mandel Kramer was Shrevie, the cab driver. I *adored* The Shadow.

Years and years later, working in Hollywood, I was at Screen Gems writing *Circle of Fear* and a segment of *The Flying Nun* and a little ghosting on *Police Story*, and William Castle had bought the rights to The Shadow, and I went to him and told him I'd write the damned screenplay *for nothing*, not a centavo, zip, nada, just gimme a chance! He had hired me for *Circle of Fear*, and he was high on my work, but he laughed and said he'd already assigned the script. To Jimmy Sangster! Well, sheeeeet, I thought, Sangster is a terrific writer, but not for The Shadow. He who knows what evil lllllurks in the hearts of men is a purely American kind of folk-hero, an American taste, an American icon that no Limey, no matter how good a writer, could possibly translate to film with the proper panache and misterioso. (I make this

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contention about foreign directors assaying American product as a general rule of thumb. If you think I'm being irrationally nationalistic, just consider how appropriately Hugh Hudson, that great Brit Director of *Chariots of Fire*, did when he interpreted Tarzan, another purely American pop icon, in his monumentally boneheaded *Greystoke*.) But I digress. Do I digress myself? Very well then I digress myself. (I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Never got made. Sangster wrote a less than ebullient script, and the project was shelved; rights reverted, got sold to someone else, and so on and so on. Comes the announcement a few years ago that Marty Bregman had gotten a deal with Universal to develop the material yet again, and I'm weaving mist-dreams that somehow, telepathically, out-of-body intuition, ectoplasmatic pheromones, *some*thing, one of the five producers on this deal would learn of me, sense in the stillness of the night my crazed passion to write *The Shadow*, and they'd knock at my door one day and say, "Come, wee child from Painesville; come, and write the dream of your dreams!"

Stop.

We inaugurate, with this column, something no other film columnist proffers: THE SECRET AGENDA. Solemn oath, hand to my heart, spit in my palm and punch it with my other fist, any time I have a background that can influence my opinion of a film, or a writer, or an actor, or *any*thing in a column, I will pause and reveal THE SECRET AGENDA. You need never fear that I'm badmouthing someone like, say, Gregory Feeley or Charles Platt, just because they are my enemies and I'd happily shoot them into outer space *sans* rocket; or that I'm praising, say, Erika Eleniak not on her acting ability (which for a newcomer, is arresting and beguiling) but because she is the second most beautiful woman in the world. You will always know whence I come. Let Pauline Kael match *that* homage to Caesar's Wife. His first wife, Pauline, the one they don't talk about much. Good hit, lousy field.

So now you know how I went to see *The Shadow*.

Do it to me, I said.

The report: Good hit, lousy field. Special effects right out of the most fertile vineyard in your imagination (except for this stupid, dippy-looking demon-knife, a kind of Arabic *kris*, which periodically gets imbued with a simulacrum of life, and flies through the air and keeps trying to do a Lorena Bobbitt on The Shadow), but the live-action stuff is seriously Rip Van Winkle. We're talking *boe*-ring.

Like so many of these F/X shivarees, from *Explorers* to *Death Becomes Her*, from *Honey I Blew Up the Kid* to *Solarbabies*, from *Last Action Hero* to *Star Trek: The Motionless Picture*, this is a frontrunner in the legion of the walking dead. It shambles afield, but it has no brain. It capers and jabbers, it

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does its little rigadoon, but it hasn't got the wit or innovation to blow itself to kingdom come. This is a stupid film, filled with breathtaking adolescent electronic and computer technique, all in service of a story created by semiliterate children at recess time, children who cannot sit still long enough in class to learn anything. It is historically and culturally imbecile, tone-deaf and derivative, lumbering and flatulent, a waste of time and money, of energy and talent. It is a great 4th of July pyrotechnic presentation, for people who have forgotten why we celebrate the Fourth. It is a well-bedecked Christmas tree for those who think Christmas means school's out and let's go shopping.

This is yet another example of the paucity of imagination that has come to be known as The American Cinema of the '90s. At long last, after twenty-five years of dumbing-down the product for what businessmen and business-women perceive as the idiot teen audience, we have *this:* the perfect empty-calorie eye-candy that fools the eye 24 times a second. *The Shadow* is all flash and filigree, as Terry Southern would put it; F/X entrepreneurs run amuck; story written by know-nothing scribblers brought up on a steady diet of tv and post-music noise.

And make no mistake, it isn't the fault of the actors, who do the best they can (though why anyone would cast the glorious Jonathan Winters in a role unsuited to his talents, and then in pawky fashion not even allow him to *demonstrate* those talents, passeth understanding); nor is it the fault of the director, a certain Mulcahy who has, well, a small but identifiable ability; nor the fault of the brilliant production designer Joseph Nemec III; it is a gobbet fit only to be stuffed down the craws of the pimplebrained producers, all five of 'em, among whom there ain't a scintilla of commonsense...and the writer, David Koepp, who is oh so hot these days, oh so wooed and exulted for his scrivening on *Death Becomes Her* (cataclysmically stupid film), *Jurassic Park* (idiot plot with F/X runamuck), *Carlito's Way* (Scarface Pacino lisps again), and *The Paper* (which set back the Fourth Estate to the days of tabloids on stone tablets).

Those responsible for this mess fear producing Art.

They turn all substances to dross, and coat it with the F/X fool's gold, and dish it out in ten-second jump-cut MTV video commercials, knowing they've bastardized the audience so thoroughly that if they show enough glittery snakeskin rubies exploding, they'll pull their ten-twent-thirt million buck summer audience. Never mind that the film is a pile of rusty Kelvinator wrecks for a story, piss-yellowed bidets for emotion, drums of malodorous chemical waste for subtext, and severed rat heads for logic. These are people who were weaned on *I Love Lucy*, who think we really and truly need a film based on "The Beverly Hillbillies" or "The Flintstones" or "The Little

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Rascals" or "Dennis the Menace" or "Maverick" or whatever else they took to be great art when they were in swaddling.

Well, it wasn't, and they aren't, and this is yet another example of viewing the audience as mere receptors with money to be cadged and intellects to be debased. It is a stupid movie, filled with some wonderful special effects, and ordinarily I would give it the shortness of shrift it deserves. But this time they made a mistake, they fucked around with something I love.

This time they plucked the feathers off an icon not of *their* moron generation, but of mine. This time they left the environs of their own grimy ghetto, and they went back in time and sullied something I hold dear.

And *this* time, I'm gonna ream 'em good.

Yes, gentle reader, I'm back. After three years of sabbatical in Tibet, where I acquired the power to cloud men's minds so they cannot see me, I'm back to the column. I'll tell you where I've been, and all the goodies I've brought back for you, and detail all the ways in which *The Shadow* is a disgrace (and why *The Mask* isn't, even though it's no less eye-candy) when next we meet here in my sanctum sanctorum hidden beneath Rush Limbaugh's corpulent fundament. There have been many changes since last we engaged in these hi-jinks: the Noble Publisher has turned over the editorial reins to Mine Fair Editrix; you've been polite and attentive to my compatriot Kathi Maio, who will continue with us, never fear; I've managed to accrue my very own organized hate group of Baby Weasels who knew they couldn't take me one at a time, so they merged like one of those slimy alien things in a John Campbell story; movies have gotten worse; computer bulletin boards have unleashed every rambling idiot who previously at least had to know how to spell to publish a fanzine; OJ has got hisself in deep *merde*; many good men and women have died; and I've forgotten how desperately you needed my calm and sane observations of cinema and allied visual venues.

Consider this part one of "The Return of the Omen" and I'll be back on *The Shadow's* ass next issue. And until then, stay out of the line of fire.

Or as my momma would have said it, Woof woof a goldfish.

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Dale Bailey is another F&SF *discovery who is doing quite well for himself. In addition to his publications in this magazine, he has sold stories to* Amazing Stories, *and* The Best From F&SF *(which appeared in October from St. Martin's Press).*

About the story, Dale writes, "'Home Burial' is a story that grew out of my interest in the history of West Virginia, where I grew up.... The story is loosely based on a similar incident that my father recalls hearing my grandmother relate. The present version has been much altered and elaborated, and also owes a debt to the Robert Frost poem of the same name."

Home Burial

By Dale Bailey

FEBRUARY GRIPPED THE farm like a fist, and the baby would not let her rest. Rachel lay wakeful by her sleeping husband and listened. The baby's cry came to her as a faint protest from the burying ground, patient and mournful as the keen of wind about the clapboard house.

"Breece," she whispered, shaking him gently. "Breece, listen."

Breece mumbled, rolled over, and dragged her into his embrace, but he did not wake. Outside, the wind gusted, rattling the knotted fingers of the skeletal oak that stood by the house and chasing watery moon-cast shadows through the bedroom. The barn door banged. Gray specks of snow spat beyond the pale square of the window.

The wind grew louder, drowning out the baby's racket, and Rachel felt a quick surge of relief that Breece had not awakened. She pulled the rough woolen blanket close against her breasts, still heavy and sore with milk, and admonished herself for imagining things. *Breece Casey is a practical man,* her mama had told her the week preceding the wedding. *He won't tolerate*

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your day-dreaming and nonsense!

That had been almost a year ago. Sighing, Rachel knotted herself about the lingering tenderness between her legs. In the chill of the midnight bedroom, there came to her a series of stark inviolable memories: sweltering summer nights when Breece had lovingly assembled the tiny crib, hardly a real bed at all, and she had sewn the unborn child a tiny flannel night dress; another night, more recent, rank with the doctor's whiskey-stench, the fever vision of his face distorted by a haze of pain and morphine.

Rachel choked back tears. Squirming from beneath the dead weight of Breece's arm, she settled herself more comfortably in the goose-down mattress. Quills pricked her side and back. Every night for two weeks now, the baby's patient mournful wail had pierced through to her from the burying ground. Imagination, she told herself, but tonight she was glad for the clamorous fury of the storm. Wind shrieked through the barren hollows about the house and drove snow against the window-panes with a gravelly spatter.

Presently, Rachel began to drift. Swept gradually into the tidal rhythms of Breece's respiration, she dreamed of a sun-dappled forest clearing, the warm bundle of a breathing child against her breasts, ribbons woven into its fine hair.

A sound woke her. Her heart pounded against her ribs; frigid air needled her lungs. Breece slept restlessly beside her, his scored knuckles curved beneath his chin, his breath sour. Big downy-looking snowflakes swirled beyond the window. The storm had abated, the wind died down. Rachel held her breath and listened.

Nothing.

And then, just as she began to breathe, there it was again — the shrill cry of the child cutting through the night from the burying ground. Panic knotted Rachel's throat. She pushed aside the covers and crossed the icy floor to stand in the chill radiance of the window.

Through her faint homely reflection, twisted by the brittle skin of ice that had grown over the glass, Rachel looked out at a world rounded and dimensionless beneath a dingy lid of snow. The oak tree loomed against the moonlit sky like a shaggy grandfather, bearded gray by the storm. Farther away, on a hill that would turn gentle and green come spring, lay the burying ground. Three roughly carved wooden markers and a single wooden cross, knotted about with rawhide strips, leaned like jagged teeth from the frozen

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earth. The markers indicated the graves of Breece's folks, dead two decades, and his first wife, Shelley, dead near upon three years now. The cross wasn't even two weeks old; it marked the spot where Rachel's child had been buried.

"Rachel?" Breece said, and she turned to see him sitting upright in a tangle of blankets. He watched her alertly.

"Listen," she said. "Can you hear it?"

She looked back out the window and the sound of the baby came to her with the icy clarity of undiluted pain. Rachel felt as if a knitting needle had been plunged into her heart.

"Hear what?"

Rachel wrapped herself in an embrace and saw that tiny goose bumps had erupted along her forearms. "The baby."

Breece sighed. She heard the covers shift, his bare feet against the floorboards. "Come to bed now," he said, appearing in the window as a ghostly reflection. "Ain't nothing out there."

"Don't you *hear* it?"

"I don't hear a thing except you talking foolishness." His hands closed about her arms. "Ain't nothing to hear."

"Our baby's crying, Breece."

"Baby's dead, Rachel," he said gently. "You know that."

Anger boiled out of some poisoned well within her. "I don't know that," she said. "I never saw the baby. You buried him without me ever seeing him. I don't know that."

Breece's rough hand came up to smooth hair from her forehead. "Nothing out there, Rachel. Nothing at all." He guided her back to the bed.

For a long time Rachel lay awake, staring at the ceiling and listening to the baby cry through the darkness. Very clearly, in her mind's eye, she could see the tiny flannel night dress, hand-sewn against the cold. "You buried him naked, didn't you, Breece?" she asked. "You buried him naked and now he's about to freeze."

But Breece was already sleeping, and he didn't answer.

"I'm going to see about hiring a man in Copperhead tomorrow," Breece said at breakfast. "I'm going to need a fellow come spring."

The small kitchen was chilly, despite the fire blazing in the stove. Rachel sipped at her coffee before she answered. "You never had to hire anyone before."

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Breece probed at his eggs with his fork. Thick dry yolk clogged the tines. Rachel still hadn't mastered the technique of getting the whites solid and keeping the yolks runny, the way Breece liked them.

"There's too much work around the place," he said. "It ain't getting any easier, old as I am."

"You ain't all that old."

Breece grunted as if to say, sixteen years older than you, Rachel. But all he said aloud was, "Maybe I'll just hire a boy. I could use an extra hand."

Unbidden, an image flashed through Rachel's mind: the cross Breece had driven into the cold earth over the child's grave. She shook her head, gathered up her dishes, and moved to the wash basin. The water was pleasantly warm from the stove, and she liked the clean biting smell of the soap. She imagined a fresh-bathed baby girl might smell that way.

A few minutes passed, and Rachel had begun to hope that Breece wouldn't say anything more when he spoke again. "How you feeling?" he asked.

A plate slipped out of her hand, bobbed to the surface without breaking, and Rachel felt tears start up behind her eyes. "Just fine, Breece."

"Turn around here and look at me."

Rachel dipped the plate into the rinse water, and turned to face him.

Breece gestured vaguely with his fork. "You know what I mean. How do you feel down there?"

Rachel stared at the floor. "Well, I don't know, Breece."

"Are you hurting any?"

"A little, I guess."

Breece shook his head. "You'll be all right soon," he said gruffly, and a minute later she heard his fork clatter to his plate and the door bang shut behind him.

An immense silence followed. For a moment, Rachel imagined she could hear the faint ghostly sound of a baby crying, and then she shook her head again.

Imagination.

Still, she could not get the matter out of her head. Breece was over forty now, anxious for a child. Last July, when he had taken her down to Sauls Run for the fireworks, he had almost said as much. *You can't take care of that farm when I'm gone,* he had said then. Skyrockets exploded into radiant showers

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behind him, and Rachel felt sweep through her a wave of sympathy for all that beauty. Breece glanced shyly at her belly, which had barely begun to swell, and when he met her eyes, she saw that his face was all ashine with fierce joy. *Our boy*, he had said, *he'll take care of it.*

And that was the problem, Rachel thought, as she slid the last dish into the cupboard. For Breece, a child was just a means to an end; he wouldn't care that the next child would not be the same as the first. As long as it was a boy, everything would be fine as far as Breece was concerned, and already he was after her to try again.

RACHEL WAS heating a pot of stew for dinner when the stranger arrived. When the knock sounded at the front door, Breece set aside the newspaper he had picked up last week in Copperhead, stood, and went out into the hall. He returned a moment later, followed by a dark-headed man clad in a black linen suit, and a great overcoat that hung to his shiny boots. He clasped a scuffed leather case in one hand, and extended his other to Rachel as he crossed the kitchen. In the instant before her hand was engulfed in his firm grip, Rachel looked up and found herself staring into a pleasant, clean-shaven face split by a wide mouth.

"Evening, ma'am."

Rachel tried to speak, but her mouth had gone dry. She cleared her throat and felt a hot flush mount her cheeks. "Evening," she managed. Flustered, she turned to the stove, and discovered that her spoon had slipped into the stew.

"This here is Rowe Montgomery," Breece said. He sat down at the table and nodded at Rachel. "My wife."

Rachel nodded politely, and watched as Montgomery draped his great coat over the back of a chair. "My horse slipped and lamed himself up the valley a ways," he said. "Your husband said you all could put me up for the evening."

"Pleased to have you," Rachel said.

"I thought I'd run him down Copperhead come morning, since I was going anyway." Breece looked at Montgomery. "You can catch a train there, or buy yourself another horse."

Rachel placed bowls around the table, setting the chipped one at her own place and turning it to hide the flaw. She served the stew with cool milk from

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the cellar and fresh-baked bread. Breece devoured his food as though he was afraid someone would take it away from him. Rachel ate with embarrassed delicacy, keeping a covert watch over Montgomery.

"Good stew," Montgomery remarked at one point, and once again Rachel felt a hot flush mount her cheeks. She nodded, and stared at the table. She could feel Breece eyeing her.

After the meal, Breece lifted his rifle from the pegs above the door and shrugged into his old coat.

"Where are you off to?" Rachel asked.

"We got to see about Mr. Montgomery's horse."

"You're not aiming to kill it, are you?"

"I don't know," Breece said. He looked at Montgomery. "He's all lamed up, ain't he?"

Montgomery nodded, and Breece turned to meet Rachel's gaze. His eyes gleamed in the light from the stove, and all at once, as if her mama was standing right there and had spoken into her ear, Rachel again heard the words she had last night remembered: *Breece Casey is a practical man.*

"We better see to that horse," Breece said to Montgomery, and then they were gone.

"What is it that you do for a living, Mr. Montgomery?" Rachel asked when they returned. She looked up from her knitting, and gazed at the two men by the stove. Breece slouched in a kitchen chair and whittled, his thin face shadowed with gray stubble, his eyes hooded. Montgomery sat with his back straight and his white sleeves rolled back over forearms thick with dark corkscrews of hair. He had remarkable posture, Rachel thought.

"I'm a salesman, Mrs. Casey."

Breece paused in his whittling. "What is it you sell?"

"Books. I sell the Fellowship House Bible by subscription." Montgomery met Rachel's eyes and smiled.

Rachel glanced away. She saw that she had dropped a stitch and she set aside the knitting in frustration. "I would imagine most everybody owned a Bible already."

"Yes, ma'am, that's a fact." Montgomery laced his fingers behind his head and stared through the grate at the fire. Flames danced and licked at the hollows of his face.

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"What makes your Bibles so special that people would want to buy them?" Rachel asked.

"I sure am glad you asked that, ma'am." Montgomery stood, retrieved his leather case, and returned to his seat. "All I have here are samples," he said, extracting a bundle of cardboard sheets from the case, "but it would be a real pleasure to put you folks down for one, seeing as you've been so kind and all."

Breece straightened up in his chair a little and put aside his whittling.

"Now the missus asked what it is that makes our Bible so special," Rowe Montgomery said, "and that's a good place to start." He flipped over the first of the cardboard sheets, and Rachel saw that a printed page had been pasted there.

"The first thing that makes our Bible different, is that the words of our Lord Jesus Christ — blessed be his name — are printed in red ink. That way you can see them real easy."

Breece leaned forward to study the cardboard sheet. Montgomery indicated the red print, and Rachel saw that his cuticles formed perfect little half-moons beneath his nails.

Breece said, "I reckon it reads the same no matter what color the ink is," and a stiff embarrassed silence followed. Rachel sighed and looked away, painfully aware of the little kitchen's shabbiness. The floorboards had long since faded to a dingy gray and it seemed to her that the whole room stank of soot and bacon grease. They didn't even have a proper fireplace, just that old iron cook stove. All at once it occurred to her to wonder why she had ever married Breece, and just as suddenly a sharp voice that sounded suspiciously like that of her mama spoke up. *You didn't really have a choice, did you Rachel?* said the nasty little voice. *Twenty-five years old, and not a single proposal!*

Rachel glanced around the rundown kitchen again and felt a wave of sorrow ebb through her. No place for a little girl, anyway, she thought, and grief twisted through her guts. For a little while, in the excitement of having a real live visitor, she had managed to forget it.

"Well, now, Mr. Casey," Montgomery said, "you're right about that — the words read just the same. But they stand out, you see, the way the words of our Lord Jesus ought to."

Breece nodded, and Rachel saw that he had retreated into his customary reticence.

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"But that's not all that makes the Fellowship House Bible unique," Montgomery continued.

"What else is there?" Rachel asked.

"Pictures," said Rowe Montgomery. "The Fellowship House Bible has the finest illustrations of any such volume on the market, ma'am. There are seventy illustrations total — one for every book, and two for each of the gospels. Each one is guaranteed to be historically accurate."

"Can I see them?" Rachel asked.

Montgomery passed the sheaf of cardboard sheets to her, and Rachel began to page through them. From the dark mouth of a tomb, a man wrapped in dirty rags staggered toward the figure of a mystically glowing Christ, who stood with his head thrown back and his arms lifted to the heavens. The caption below the picture read: *Lazarus came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes.*

Rachel pursed her lips and flipped the next sheet of cardboard. Vertigo tore through her. Mounted soldiers exploded from the painting, and a slaughter-house stench of blood and sweat flooded the room. As the horsemen swept past, Rachel flattened herself against a stone wall and clutched her screaming baby to her breasts. Thick dust clogged her lungs. The thunder of hooves and the panic-stricken shrieks of women and children choked the dense air. Sobbing, Rachel turned to flee, but she hadn't gone more than a few steps before a horseman materialized out of the dust and snatched the infant from her arms.

"No!" Rachel screamed.

She threw herself against the rearing stallion, but already she was too late. With a look of withering disdain, the horseman drew back the gore-stained blade of his knife, plunged it once again into the child's breast, and —

Rachel gasped.

She felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the room, as if she could not draw breath. *Then Herod was exceeding wroth,* the caption read, *and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem.* Her fingers loosened. The cardboard sheets slid to the floor in a heap, and Rachel felt tears start down her cheeks. A gentle touch caressed her jaw, and for a moment she allowed herself to hope that Rowe Montgomery had crossed the room to comfort her, but when she looked up, it was, of course, only Breece.

* * *

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Upstairs, as Rachel changed into her gown, she could not help but run a finger over the tiny flannel night dress she had placed in the cedar-scented drawer where she kept her underthings. Shadows hovered in the flickering light, and for a moment Rachel could believe that dark horsemen tarried beyond the oil-lamp's dim pool of radiance. Distant as the trickle of water in an underground creek-bed, she heard the muffled thunder of hooves. Somewhere far away, a woman wept, and the screams of dying children filled the air.

Rachel shivered, folded the small night dress, and shut the drawer. She blew out the bedside lamp and eased herself into the corona of Breece's animal heat.

Another storm had closed in. Gray snow, silent as a midnight intruder, spun outside the window. The wind was hushed, the quiet so encompassing that it seemed to her that the snow had smothered every noise in the world.

Outside, the baby began to cry.

Rachel stiffened beside her husband. Imagination, she thought, and she closed her eyes, but words leapt into the void of thought: *Lazarus came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes.*

Rachel remembered the long hours of labor. Agony like a dagger twisted in her guts, sweat stood on her brow as she fought to expel the child —

— *the girl, the baby girl* —

— from her body.

And then, suddenly, the pain was gone. It was as if she had fallen into a well. A dim circle of awareness receded above her until at last it disappeared and she plunged, not sleeping but not awake, into the subterranean depths of unconsciousness. When next she became aware, the pain, the sweat-soiled bedclothes, and the desire, the reflexive *need*, to thrust the child from her body — all these were gone. A faraway circle of radiance, shiny as a new coin, gradually took shape above her; centered in that circle, she saw the doctor's grim visage. She could smell his familiar whiskey stink. Somehow, she had known that he was packing his instruments for the ride to Copperhead, known, too, that in the vast reach of darkness between the two glimpses of light, she had given birth to a child.

She felt a dull pinch in her upper arm, and darkness edged in around her.

When it once again retreated, Breece stood before her. *The baby was born dead*, he had said.

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And perhaps that was true. Except...

Except that she could hear it during the long hours of darkness when sleep would not come. She could hear it, the patient mournful cry of a child in the night. With astonishing clarity, that strange vision loomed up before her: the horseman rearing up and away from her as he drove the gore-stained knife into her baby's stomach.

Why couldn't the baby rest?

A terrible suspicion blossomed within her.

AFTER BREAKFAST, Breece headed out to the barn to hitch up the wagon for the ride into Copperhead. Rachel watched him tramp away through the ice-sheathed lens of the kitchen window. She turned back to her dishes. Exhaustion stitched her eyelids, and sour nausea coiled through her guts. The baby had not let up last night. Rachel had not slept.

Behind her, Rowe Montgomery cleared his throat. Rachel turned, wiping her hands on a dish towel. Montgomery stood by the kitchen table, muffled in his boots and great coat.

"I'm sorry about last night, Mrs. Casey," he said. "I didn't know those pictures would upset you."

Rachel set the towel aside. "There ain't no way you could have known. You oughtn't feel responsible."

"I'm mighty sorry about your loss." He paused as if he expected Rachel to speak. When she did not, he went on. "I went ahead and put you down for one of the Bibles — "

"Breece and I, we can't afford no fancy books."

"Think of it as a gift," he said. He glanced at the case by his feet. "It's just my way of saying thanks for all you folks done for me. It's my way of saying I'm sorry."

Rachel smiled. Warmth radiated from the core of her being. "Thank you, Mr. Montgomery, that's right nice." She glanced out the window and saw Breece emerge from the barn, leading the horse and wagon. "Breece is coming," she said. "He'll be anxious to get started."

Montgomery nodded and picked up his case.

"Goodbye, Mr. Montgomery," Rachel said. She turned back to her washing.

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A moment passed. "Mrs. Casey?"

"Yes?"

"I thought I heard something last night."

Rachel's heart quickened. She felt suspended in the moment, trapped, like an insect she had once seen preserved in a square of amber. She tried to speak, but her throat had rusted closed like an old pipe, and the moment stretched, an elastic interval in which it seemed all time and movement had ceased except for the blood pounding through her brain. At last she managed to work up enough spit to say, "What did you think you heard?" — and time lurched forward again.

She dipped a plate into the soapy water and began to scrub dried egg yolk away. The kitchen smelled of coffee and wood smoke. Breece's whip snapped as he urged the horse through the snow toward the house.

"Sounded like a baby," said Rowe Montgomery.

The plate slipped from her soapy fingers and smashed on the edge of the metal tub. The sound was very loud in the small room. Clay shards skimmed across the floor.

"Probably just a bobcat," Rachel said. "They sound like a child sometimes." She turned to look at him.

He had not moved. He held the leather case in one hand. His face formed a pale smear beyond the dark folds of his upturned collar. He smiled suddenly, and when he spoke his voice boomed with forced gaiety. "Of course," he said. "Probably just a bobcat. I spend so much time on the road, you know. My imagination, it gets carried away with me."

Still smiling, he started to move toward the door.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Rachel asked.

Montgomery stopped and fixed her with his clear gaze. "Well, ma'am, I don't rightly know."

Rachel heard the wagon rattle to a halt outside. The horse whickered and stamped. Breece yelled Montgomery's name.

"I reckon you ought to go," Rachel said.

Rowe Montgomery stepped to the door, paused with his hand on the latch, and looked back at her. "My grandma, now, she used to say that spirits lingered, if you hadn't done them right." He stared at Rachel, but she had the feeling that he did not see her. She thought he had the look of a man staring way off into the past, or into himself, and she felt as if she stood at the verge

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of some vast mystery that with his next words would be revealed.

Outside, Breece hollered again, his voice impatient.

Montgomery shook his head and smiled. "That's just an old wives tale," he said. "As for myself, I don't know what to believe." He dipped his head, and opened the door.

The frigid breath of February illuminated the small kitchen. Rachel caught a glimpse of the wagon and the snow-covered yard beyond, and then the door closed with a bang and Rowe Montgomery was gone.

Rachel had not been alone for more than an hour when the crying began. She tightened her lips and resolved to ignore it. *Idle hands are devil's tools!* her mama had frequently told her, and remembering that, Rachel swept through the house in a virtual frenzy, as if, in the mind-deadening industry of scoured floors and straightened cupboards, she could somehow submerge the patient clamor of the child.

And then, without even an awareness of how she had come to be there, Rachel found herself in the bedroom. She was sitting on the bed with the baby's tiny night dress cradled in her hands. The complaint of the buried child — conspicuous as a single dark thread woven through a swatch of shining white — pierced all through the stillness of the abandoned house. Tears carved icy runnels through her flesh. There fell over her the shadow of that awful suspicion which had last night taken root in the soil of her heart.

This was what she most feared, most believed:

Breece Casey had killed her baby daughter.

Even as she allowed this insight to frame itself in her mind, she told herself that it was not true, that it could not be true. And yet she could not help but believe it.

For Breece Casey was a practical man. Her mama had told her that, and if Rachel had learned anything in the last year, it was the truth of that statement. Breece Casey was a practical man.

His was the kind of practicality that hesitated not for one moment to shoot a lamed horse, his the kind of practicality that sought a spinster for a wife — not for love and certainly not for beauty, but for the simple peasant strength of her large-boned body and the inescapable utility of her wide-slung hips, through which might issue ruddy strong-limbed heirs, their tiny fists already clenched in anticipation of the long labors that awaited them. And

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when those wide hips delivered forth not the first of those ruddy-faced little boys, but a pink and screaming baby girl — what then? His was the kind of practicality that would not hesitate to place a pillow over that child's face and hold it there until her screaming stopped.

Such things were not uncommon, Rachel knew, and it would have been a simple matter to buy the doctor's silence. An occasional bottle of whiskey would have done it — infinitely cheaper than the cost of raising a daughter.

Rachel Casey, married for eleven interminable months, stood and folded the little night-dress against her breasts.

Spirits linger, if you haven't done them right, Rowe Montgomery had said, and all at once Rachel saw what had to be done.

For Breece Casey's was the kind of practicality that would bury a little girl naked to save his wife the labor of sewing a new night dress when the next child —

— *a boy, a little boy* —

— was born, and Rachel could not allow it.

Rachel drove the spade into the frozen earth with all her weight; the muscles in her shoulders and arms tensed with the effort. Heavy flakes of snow, gray with the pollution of the coal mines down Copperhead, drifted through her field of vision. With every shovelful of earth, the child's crying ratcheted up a notch or two.

Rachel emptied the spade onto the mound of dirt by the grave, wiped perspiration from her forehead with cold-numbed fingers, and reached once again into the pocket of Breece's woolen work coat. The flannel night-dress was still there. She paused to catch her breath, propping her weight against the smooth haft of the shovel.

A low-slung leaden sky brooded over the mountains. To her left, white smoke curled from the ramshackle chimney of the farmhouse, and for a single bitterly amused instant, she wondered why she had ever found the kitchen chilly. Then, with a glance toward the stark tree-lined ridges that rose in steep ranks to her right, she got back to work.

The blade clanged as it smashed against the wooden coffin. The clamorous bellow of the child grew still louder.

She shook her head to dislodge tears before they froze to her cheeks, and began to dig with renewed vigor. Before twenty minutes passed she had

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widened the hole sufficiently to scramble down, grasp the tiny coffin by the burlap handles at either end, and wrestle it from the ground. The crying was very loud now. She saw that the box was not a proper coffin at all — merely a big loose-boarded shipping crate from the commissary down Copperhead — and a swift arrow of hatred for Breece lodged within her.

Rachel collapsed beside the coffin. The empty grave gaped like an open gate into some undiscovered country. She fought off a bout of hysterical laughter. The baby's noise had evolved into a fortress of sound, walling her away from even the most immediate perceptions — the darkening sky as the dull copper blur of the sun inched below the high western ridges, the knife-edged gust of the wind as it poured out of the high passes into the bleak bowl of Breece Casey's farm, her own fingers, curled into frozen talons.

None of this mattered. None of it.

Rachel flung back the wooden lid. Rusty hinges squealed; the lid shuddered against the mounded soil.

Rachel was shocked to see that the child had been wrapped in a thick woolen blanket. Tiny fingers curled beneath its chin, and its face wrinkled in an expression of boundless noisy energy. For the briefest possible instant, Rachel believed the child alive; then she saw that it had merely been preserved by the icy weather. She lifted the baby with trembling fingers and clasped it to her chest. Cold, so cold. That terrific bawling complaint continued to pour from its frozen lungs. Her heart pounding, she fumbled beneath the blanket to check.

A boy, she thought, a boy, *it's a boy, it's a* —

"Rachel!"

Blood hammered through her veins. Clasping the baby against her breasts, she stumbled to her feet and wheeled around to face the house. A figure emerged from the swirling snow. Rachel staggered back, believing that a grinning horseman loomed out of the storm before her, his knife arm drawn back to strike the fatal blow. Then, as quickly as it had possessed her, the illusion passed. A man on foot walked toward her, his head bowed against the intensifying storm.

Breece, she thought. Breece.

Rachel clutched the tiny corpse to herself. The baby shrieked.

"You murderer!" she screamed. Cradling the child with one hand, she drew back the other, frozen into a twisted talon, to batter Breece away. "Son of a bitch! Murderer!"

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Breece caught her arm even as it swung toward him. Frost rimed the whiskers around his lips. His eyes flashed out at her in a way she had not seen since that long-ago July 4th, shiny with strong emotion, grief and fear and maybe —

— *maybe love.*

Breece Casey is a practical man, hissed that insistent voice.

"No! You've got it wrong, all wrong!"

"Then how? How?"

"It was an accident," he whispered hoarsely. "The doctor, that goddamned drunken doctor."

Rachel stumbled away and went to her knees. She felt as if the earth had abruptly shifted on its axis, and for a single vertiginous instant, she thought she might be sick. Snow soaked the fabric of her skirt. When she lifted her head to look at Breece, hair whipped about her face. His eyes had filled with tears. Rachel saw then how it must have been for him — the guilt and anger, the burden of a grief that surpassed his meager store of words. Most of all, the knowledge he had tried to save her: the baby could have lived. All at once, there passed before her the memory of that distant July — skyrockets raining down glory all about them; Breece's face, aglow with fierce joy. An incandescent blaze of feeling brighter than anything she had known illuminated her, and her callow fantasies of Rowe Montgomery ignited like a heap of cardboard images.

"Help me," Rachel said. "Help me dress him."

She fumbled the tiny night dress from her pocket, and Breece helped her tug it around the baby's stiffened limbs. The wailing began to die away, to stutter off into hiccoughs and gasps, and finally silence. Rachel held the child against her for a moment, pressed her lips to its icy flesh, and placed it into the wooden crate. She tucked the blanket in tight around it, and together, they lowered the crate into the earth.

"Go, now," Breece said, "you go on. I'll finish here."

Rachel hesitated, hearing in her mind the baby's terrible draining cry. But that was over now; it was time to trust. Clutching the woolen coat close, Rachel turned and walked downhill to the house. She heard the rasp of the shovel, the rattle of dirt against the coffin, but after a few more steps even those sounds faded. She walked on through a deep easy silence that seemed to fill up the world.

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Scott Mackay's first novel, A Friend in Barcelona (HarperCollins Canada), *appeared in hardcover in 1991. He has also published short stories and articles in more than fifteen journals, newspapers and magazines. "The Sages of Cassiopeia" marks his first publication in a major American science fiction magazine.*

Scott says the story evolved when he learned that the great Danish astronomer, Tycho Brahe, had a stillborn twin brother. "This dead twin brother occupied Brahe's thoughts on numerous occasions, and appeared in his writings often," Scott writes. But what would have happened if Tycho's twin had lived? Would our views of the heavens be any different than they are now?

The Sages Of Cassiopeia

By Scott Mackay

ON A CLEAR COLD NOVEMBER night in 1572, near the town of Knudstrup in Denmark, Tycho Brahe, one of the last great naked-eye astronomers, stood on the west tower of his uncle's abbey, Herritzvad, gazing up at the sky. He took his eye away from his sextant and glanced at his brother Magnus. Magnus swept the stone floor, his mongoloid eyes staring at the dying embers in the grate, his breath frosting over in the frigid air.

"Magnus," called Tycho. "I've discovered a new star. Come see for yourself. It outshines Venus."

Magnus didn't look up. His idiot brother continued to sweep the same spot of stone floor, his red hair shaggy over his flattened skull, his eyes good-natured but dull. If only he would do something useful, like build the fire, fetch some warm spiced wine, or empty the chamber pot. I have studied at

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Copenhagen, Leipzig, Rostock, and Augsburg, have given lectures by royal command to King Frederick and his court. And I ask myself, can this unfortunate dunce be my sibling?

Tycho turned back to his sextant and looked up at the newly luminous object shining brightly among the murkier stars of Cassiopeia. How far is this new star away from the earth? Is it part of the great cogwheel of planets that rolls around the earth, or is it perched somewhere between the moon and the sun? Tycho lifted his quill and made a notation. Position unchanged. How to explain this phenomenon? Was it something that might confirm his own careful notion of the universe, that the sun revolved around the earth, that the planets revolved around the sun, that together the sun and the planets rolled like a big wheel through the sky with earth as its hub?

Behind him, Magnus stopped sweeping. Tycho put his quill down and turned around.

Magnus leaned the broom against the wall and lumbered over to the fire. He lifted the iron poker and stirred the embers, showing unexpected initiative, took a few small pieces of firewood and piled them in an intricate cat's cradle. Tycho dropped his quill and took a few steps forward, forgetting about the new star. Was this his brother, the same unfortunate soul he had to feed and clothe every morning, the same dullard who had never spoken an intelligible word in his life, and who didn't have the manual dexterity to fit his own cod-piece? Was this Magnus, building this well-designed and thoughtful palace of wood?

Magnus leaned forward and blew on the embers, coaxing the flames. Was it a miracle? Magnus stirred the embers again, turning them the way a baker folds currants into a pudding, his fingers, for the first time ever, nimble and careful. The fire sprang up, licked the fresh wood, then cracked and popped. The light of the fire played over Magnus' freckled face, danced in his mongoloid eyes, rippled through his carrot orange hair. Was this God's fair hand at work, a divine intervention turning a fool into a sage?

Tycho put his hand on his brother's shoulder. Magnus looked up at Tycho, and in the idiot's eyes the mist of stupidity lifted, and a brother's recognition, love, and devotion took their rightful place. Tycho leaned forward.

"Magnus?" he said.

Magnus got up, straightened his shoulders, stood to his full height, and

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walked, not lumbered, to the sextant. With unexpected delicacy he put his eye to the instrument. Tycho stood back, his blood running lightly through his body, tickling his heart with anticipation. The idiot worked his lips back and forth. Then he looked at Tycho, his eyes bright with discovery.

"Venus?" said Magnus.

His brother's first word; so fitting it should be the name of earth's sister planet. Tears came to Tycho's eyes. This was a miracle. Nothing like this had ever happened in Knudstrup before.

"No, Magnus," he said. "Not Venus. A new star in the Cassiopeia constellation. But you will learn, dear brother. You will learn everything I know."

Tycho sat on the hard uncomfortable chair across from Bishop Anders, feeling out of place in these holy chambers, uneasy, as if the mounted stag's head above the large and never-extinguished fire watched him. Despite the bright day and unseasonable warmth, the shutters remained closed. The bishop wore his heaviest black robe. Tycho was here to show the old man his latest astronomical notes. The bishop was an important man, the king's envoy in this province of Scania, and if Tycho could please the king through Bishop Anders, his work would continue unhindered, and with royal sanction.

The bishop pushed the sheets aside, his brow knitting. He got up, ambled over to the fire, and stirred the embers with the poker. The fire danced from the ashes, casting unruly shadows on the rafters. So prudent to please the court, and more importantly, the Church, even after the Reformation, especially because he was a Lutheran in Catholic territory. But what, exactly, pleased Bishop Anders? Bishop Anders preached frugality and sacrifice from the pulpit, yet lived like a prince and allowed the brothers of the order to eat red meat every day. How was one to reconcile the stag's head mounted on the wall with the figure of Christ on the Crucifix next to the window? Truly a puzzling man, an unpredictable and unpleasant man, a man who had always envied the house of Brahe. The bishop turned from the fire.

"Circles and numbers and endless observations," said Bishop Anders. "A truly meticulous account of Our Lord's universe." He walked to the table and shuffled through the sheets. "But this here," he said, pointing, "where you mention Kopernik of Cracow. Why must you do that? Everyone knows

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he was damned as a heretical fool. His work is no better than the scrawl of a madman."

"Your Holiness, I mention Kopernik because of the discrepancies he discovered in Ptolemy's system. Certainly he was misguided to claim the sun resides at the center of the universe, but perhaps you haven't fully understood my final calculations," said Tycho. "You'll see that I've explained Kopernik's inconsistencies while keeping earth in its true and proper place."

"I don't care about your calculations, Lord Brahe," said the bishop. "I care about your soul. And I sometimes fear the way of science leads directly to the Devil. Is it not better to behold and worship God's miracles? Everything you need to know is written here." The bishop tapped the thick Bible on the table. "Let us not question God's wisdom in putting the earth in the center of the universe. Let us not question this new star in the sky, for there was once a star over Bethlehem with the same benign radiance. Let us not question how your brother has gained reason or how the widow Huitfeldt's Peder has been touched with intelligence. These are miracles, Lord Brahe, and to pursue them with scientific study shows ill judgment and a temperament hardly attuned to the truer course of prayer."

The Brahe brothers walked through the village of Knudstrup, Tycho on his mare, Magnus leading the horse by a rope. As they neared the canal, the village bullies emerged from behind the embankment and pelted Magnus with mud and cow dung, laughing, shrieking with cruel glee.

"Be gone with you, wretched curs," cried Tycho, drawing his sword.

Much to Tycho's surprise, Magnus darted away from the horse. The boys stood there with terror in their eyes. Magnus grabbed two of the biggest, dragged them kicking and screaming to the embankment wall, and, using his ox-like strength, pitched them into the canal. The others scattered like wheat chaff in the wind while the two wet culprits sputtered for breath and pulled themselves up onto the muddy bank. Magnus turned to Tycho.

"A chilly immersion for these ne'er-do-well knaves," he said, laughing. "For all the cripples they've stoned and all the idiots they've scoffed."

"Dear brother, are you truly Magnus?"

"Of Herritzvad Abbey, the simple sibling of the great Tycho. My beloved Tyge, who knows the secret clockwork of the stars."

"Yes, but not as simple as before. The Holy Father has blessed me,

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Magnus. I've found a new star, and I've found a new brother."

They walked past the village common, where the grass had turned brown and the hoar-frost bearded the brambles in the far thicket. Magnus strode along beside the horse, a new man, refashioned into the brother Tycho had never had, his eyes quick, full of purpose, his face rosy in the morning cold. Off to see the widow Huitfeldt, because she, too, had been blessed by this miracle. Tycho had to see it for himself, had to know that the widow Huitfeldt's idiot son Peder had been touched by the same hand of reason. Tycho had to see it because if the light of intelligence had finally come to Peder Huitfeldt, then Tycho could embrace, without secret doubt, the miraculous transformation of his brother.

"Then it is not Venus, Tyge?" asked Magnus.

And yet was this intelligence, to pick up the strain of a conversation days old, with no proper reference, to dive right in and expect the listener to follow?

"No, Magnus, not Venus. Venus roams across the sky and this new star is fixed. What we see each night in the constellation of Cassiopeia is not only a new star, but a new kind of star."

"But why doesn't this star move like Venus, Mars, or Jupiter? Why must it be shackled to the sky like a prisoner, and not free to roam like its brothers and sisters?"

"Magnus, I believe this new star must make its home in the celestial globe, beyond the endless round of the sun, the moon, and the planets, and that it is affixed to this globe like all the other stars."

"Brother Tyge, perhaps this new star is not a star at all; perhaps it floats just beyond the ether and watches us. Perhaps this silver smudge in the heavens may be the Holy Creator's eye."

Tycho smiled. The light of intelligence may have touched his brother Magnus, but in many ways he was still a child, naive and precocious, eager to jump to swift conclusions in order to avoid careful study and observation. Yet even the most far-fetched speculations couldn't be dismissed at this early stage; if the Holy Maker's hand could so change his brother, why couldn't His eye hover just above the ether? Had there ever been an object like this before? The solar eclipse of 1560, which so inspired his interest in astronomy, now seemed commonplace. The conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 1563, which had determined the nature of his life's work, was of no significance when compared to this strangest and most brilliant of celestial objects. Only

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rigorous measurement would insure an explanation.

"Brother Magnus, your devotion is strong and deep, but let us not allow our religious fervor to overrule a more reasonable approach. We shall wait and see. The star shall make itself known."

"But Tyge, believe me when I tell you, this is not a star. It is an eye. And it watches us, even when we sleep in our beds."

"We shall see, Magnus, we shall see."

They passed the tanner's, the cart-wright's, and the silk weaver's, and soon came to the widow Huitfeldt's thatched roof cottage at the edge of the village. Peder stood outside with a large staff in his hand, gazing at the sun, and the moment Tycho saw him, he knew it was true, that the imbecile's torpor had been lifted by the same divine hand that had so graced his brother, and that Peder now observed the world with keen quick eyes. As Peder heard their horse approach, he turned from the sunrise, and when he saw Tycho, sank to one knee and doffed his hat, in homage to the astronomer's noble rank.

"Rise, Peder," called Tycho. "I see with my own eyes the change God has wrought in you. The bishop tells me you have been blessed with the full use of your faculties, and that you have been conducting experiments on the movements of the sun."

Peder and Magnus acknowledged each other with a silent nod, as if they belonged to a guild of freemasons, or some such other secret society; joined by this common miracle, they were brothers in their new-found intelligence. How strange to see the folds of Cathay lidding their eyes, yet the mist of the fool wiped clear.

"I have measured here with my staff the angle at which the sun's light falls upon the earth," said Peder, talking not to Tycho but to Magnus. "See here with these strokes in the ground the way the angle widens from yonder plane tree as the sun daily retreats south. Witness the leaves of yonder tree; they lie on the grass, yellow and brown, and as brittle as egg shell. The nights are long, the days short, and the wind blows cold from the northwest. I sense a change of season."

"Your observations are correct, Peder. Winter is only weeks away," explained Tycho.

"But can the seasons be so short?" asked Peder, again addressing Magnus. "What of the wheat in the field? Will it have time to ripen? Surely we shall starve."

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They were like children, discovering the world for the first time, visitors from the realm of idiocy, observing the earth without reference, unable to connect the pieces in any meaningful way, drawing false conclusions from reasonable conjecture.

"Have no fear, Peder," said Tycho. "Perhaps in less fortunate kingdoms the subjects may starve. But here in Denmark we've always made sufficient provision for winter."

"Perhaps it is the tilt," said Magnus.

"Aye, Magnus," said Peder. "I suspect this orb spins a-kilter on its axis."

"Aye, Peder," said Magnus, "but what of Ptolemy?"

"Now, see here," said Tycho, interrupting. "You haven't read the thirteen books of Ptolemy's *Almagest*, have you, so please desist." Talking of astronomy, his voice took on an imperious tone. "The earth doesn't spin. The earth sits motionless in the center of the universe. It does not tilt. Claudius Ptolemy was at least right about that."

The two simpletons gazed at each other. Neither of you understands me, thought Tycho. As much as he loved his brother, as much as his brother shared his same profound interest in astronomy, he couldn't expect Magnus to immediately comprehend the complex workings of the universe in the few months since the appearance of the new star.

IN LATE MAY, Tycho and Magnus, ever in the pursuit of scientific curiosity, traveled to the asylum at Skokloster. The carriage bounced over the road, hitting pot-holes and ruts carved out by the spring rain. Four mounted squires in chain-mail, armed with battle swords for the protection of Tycho and his brother, shared coarse jests and oaths as they rode their chargers on either side of the carriage. Tycho found it insufferable. Yet this noise, this bone-shaking ride didn't distract his brother — a great tome lay open upon his lap, the revered Ptolemy's *Almagest*. As they crossed the bridge over the River Skern, and the drab stone walls and towers of Skokloster came into view, Magnus turned the last page and put the heavy book aside. He looked up at Tycho, lifted his knuckle to his mouth, and nibbled, as if he were preoccupied with a great worry.

"You are right, Tyge, his system is faulted. Why does he worship the perfect circle as if it were a deity? He wears the Aristotelian cosmology like

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a shackle, clings to it like a wet-nurse, feeds upon its milk of false assumptions, and postulates the most unlikely machinery of epicycle, deferent, and equant. The universe must be far simpler than this."

"And how do you propose the planets move, Magnus? In perfect squares?"

"You tease me, brother. But you must see this weakness: if my thumb is long, I will make a bigger glove; if my planet strays, I will make a larger epicycle, or perhaps shrink my deferent; if the wayward path continues, I will happily explain all with my equant. I have forty wheels, and I can fit my forty wheels to anything I see. No, Tyge, I fear Ptolemy was less interested in a single ultimate truth than in reconciling the suspect Aristotelian cosmology with the things he saw."

"Your raw intelligence needs to be tempered by wisdom and experience, Magnus," said Tycho. "You must understand that compromise, especially when it comes to scientific enquiry, is always the most reasonable approach. No doubt the intricacies of Ptolemy's system at times seem labored. Kopernik of Cracow, on the other hand, has nothing but heretical speculation and only twenty-seven of the most inexact observations. The answer lies somewhere in between. I am at present drafting my own system, a compromise between old and new, the best and most reasonable course."

"As you say, brother. But let us watch the way the eye in the sky watches," he said, gesturing out the carriage window at the new star, which now burned even during the daylight hours. "Then we shall know the truth."

"Magnus, it's not an eye. Why do you insist on that?"

"Tyge, it's an eye, and it watches us."

Such are the notions of fools. But he had a tender heart for his brother, and gladly tolerated the occasional nonsense that came out of his mouth.

The carriage came to a stop in front of the asylum. The doorkeeper let them through. And Tycho saw that all the rumors were true, that wit, sense, and logic had come to these inmates of Skokloster, that the benign radiance of Cassiopeia's star had set them free of their delusions and nightmares.

Skokloster's turnkey no longer bothered with leg-irons or any of the other customary restraints used to safeguard the public from the unpredictable antics of madmen. The inmates wandered freely, conversed in small groups, their words scholarly and gentle, as if this weren't the madmen's pen but the quadrangle at the university in Rostock. Some sat at tables, quills

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scribbling, making notes, puzzling through calculations, recording observations, while a group of others gazed at the new star as if, like Magnus, they understood its exact nature. A few others, huddled in their rags atop the archway leading to the stable, dropped object after object — first a rooster's head, then an apple core, then a rusted cannon ball — into the small alley below, recording on a slate tablet the speed and manner with which each one fell.

So it was true of Skokloster as well. And everywhere in Denmark it was the same. Fools and madmen waking up for the first time in their lives. All displayed the same observational zeal and scientific curiosity, just like Magnus. But if you were to ask any of them about the new star, they all had the same answer. That it watched earth. That it wasn't a star but an eye.

A year later, in June of 1574, the new star no longer shone so brightly. Tycho and Magnus sat at a groaning board up in the abbey's west tower enjoying a midnight repast of wild thrush stuffed with sage and bread crumbs, figs with salami, and warm beer sweetened with honey. Magnus, no longer dressed in coarse woolens but in the stylish finery befitting a young lord, studied Tycho's latest notes. You will learn, brother Magnus. You will learn everything I know — and so it had come to pass. Magnus collected the sheets, straightened them, put them on the table, and looked up at Tycho.

"Tyge..." he said. He faltered. "Tyge, you are my brother and I love you. I'm glad we've spent these eighteen months together. You have taught me much." Magnus pushed his plate away, as if he were no longer hungry, as if what he were trying to tell Tycho caused him a great deal of distress. "Your observational genius I will never doubt. You understand the worth of measurement such as no scientist ever has. But science is more than just measurement, Tyge. You should not so quickly dismiss Kopernik's idea. The Polish monk is right. The earth roams. Why shouldn't it roam? Why must it cling to the center of the universe the way you cling to the old Aristotelian cosmology?"

Tycho felt the blood spreading through his face. "The earth doesn't move," he said. "The earth is like the hub of the miller's wheel, silent, still, and majestic."

"But what about the way Mars has behaved over the last few weeks?"

Tycho looked at his brother, his eyes growing wide. "Yes, a most

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interesting back-tracking. And you can see here in the final pages of this draft just how I've accounted for these rogue movements of the red planet."

"You've built a castle of Ptolemaic mathematics to explain something a child should understand. Let old Sol act as a maypole. Let Earth roam like its Jovian brothers and sisters."

"A child's explanation can never map the complexities of the universe, Magnus. This hurried work of Kopernik's is pretty, and has a geometric appeal, but unfortunately is insupportable, even with my current observations."

"But what of Mars? Not even your accommodating system can account for this curious retrograde we see nightly. Come. Let us look again. The air is mild. It is a fine night for the play of planets."

They left the table and climbed the few steps to the turret. The air smelled of lilac, an owl hooted somewhere off in the wood, and the starry heavens arched above them in a moonless night. Two sextants, one clamped in the position of Casseopeia's new star, one unclamped and ready to follow the movements of the planets, stood against the parapet.

"Tyge, you have done all the work," said Magnus. "You have made hundreds upon hundreds of your own personal observations with the finest instruments yet available. I love you, Tyge. I will never forget the time I've spent with you. And when I go I will always remember you."

"Brother, you utter the words of a fool. What is this leave-taking you speak of? We will be together. Always. I know we will."

"Tyge, listen to me. The eye in the sky grows dim and I haven't much time. Must the world remember the noble Brahe of Knudstrup as the man who could see only with his eyes and not with his mind? Your system has many ponderous incongruities. The geometric center of your universe is badly placed. Your planets swirl and strut like a band of drunkards, careen and spin like acrobats, all to support the dim notion that the earth is at the center of the universe. I love you, Tyge, you have been the best of brothers, so please...please, listen to me."

"Are you again losing your reason, brother Magnus?"

Magnus put his eye to the second sextant. He turned to Tycho and rested his hand on his brother's shoulder.

"Remember your brother as you see him now," said Magnus. "Remember what I tell you. The sun resides in the center of the universe. Earth

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revolves around the sun, along with the planets, moves not in a circular orbit but in an ellipse, rotates once a day, and provides the geometric center for only the moon's orbit. All the idiots of Casseopeia agree on this. Please. Take another look at the red planet and you will see that I speak the truth. It is with a brother's love I wish for you a more proper understanding. Aristotle is dead. Ptolemy is dead. But if you just take another look at Mars, Tycho Brahe will live forever."

"Why do you stand like that, Magnus, with your shoulders showing the stoop of the simpleton? And why has your face gone so pale?"

"Please, Tyge, one more look at ancient Ares, and you will see his movements can only be explained by the Polish monk's configurations."

They gazed at each other. Tycho had never seen Magnus so desperate. He looked like a man about to face the gibbet. What could he do but humor his beloved brother?

He put his eye to the sextant and discovered that since last night's observation, Mars had moved in retrograde several degrees of an arc. Tycho adjusted the sextant and clamped it. The warrior planet shone like a red ember in the midnight sky, brightly and more persistently than ever. Tycho began to see that this newly observed luminosity had to have a reason, that this brightness worked hand in hand with the backward tracking, smoothly and simply, not with the swirl and strut of a drunkard, but with the even-kiltered grace of a ship on settled waters. This rogue movement couldn't be explained with the tangled mathematics of Ptolemy, but maybe, after all, with the child-like precepts of the Polish monk. How simple it now seemed. How beautiful and exalted. At last he saw it, not only with his eyes, but with his mind. The holy clockwork of the heavens as it really was, not as a castle of far-fetched calculations.

But then he heard a broom behind him, and in that same instant, the light of the new star finally went out. He turned around and saw his brother sweeping the same bit of stone floor over and over again, the spark of reason gone from his mongoloid eyes. Gone, all gone in an instant, his beloved brother, again banished to his tormented life of nightmares and delusions, his body again twisted out of shape. "Magnus?" said Tycho, taking a few steps forward. "Magnus, where have you gone? Please, dear Magnus, come hither. Do not leave me."

But Magnus stood there and swept, gazing at the dull dark spot where the

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star of Casseopeia so recently shone. Then calmly, deliberately, he urinated in his silk hosiery.

The bishop's palace loomed dark against the moonlight, its towers jagged and imposing, the crenellations of its battlements like teeth. Here, on this stony and barren approach near the sea, the wind never stopped and nothing but a few patches of yellow grass clung to the sparse top-soil. Tycho, as always, looked up at the sky. Magnus led his horse toward the palace gates. His brother should have stayed at Herritzvad Abbey. Storm clouds moved in from the north and he and Magnus would get drenched coming home. But there was nothing the simpleton liked better than to lead the horse by the rope, and a little rain would never harm him.

Magnus stopped the horse outside the gate. Tycho dismounted, knowing full well why the bishop had sent for him in the middle of the night: his revised system, amended to include many of the principles Magnus had clarified, had met with displeasure at the court.

He pounded at the door with the large iron knocker. One of the brothers of the order, wearing a black skull-cap, let them in. Magnus led the horse to a pile of hay just inside the palace walls and stood in the dark, obedient and silent, ill-at-ease, while the horse ate. Tycho followed the brother into the large hall, where the finest tapestries from Persia hung on the walls and smoky torches cast fitful shadows over the rough floor. He followed the brother down the passage to the bishop's chambers. The brother gave him one last look, as if he were an object of curiosity and pity, then pushed the heavy oak door open.

The bishop stood in front of the fire with his back to Tycho, his black robe darker than the surrounding gloom. Something fluttered up in the rafters. Outside, the wind, gaining strength, moaned over the rocks and through the turrets, and a few large drops fell against the shutters.

"I have prayed for you, Lord Brahe," said the bishop, keeping his back to the astronomer, his voice grave. "I have asked the Divine Creator to forgive you your trespass and blasphemy, and to bless you with His holy guidance. I have asked Him to lead you to a better understanding of His true design." The bishop turned around. He advanced to the table and lifted a sheaf of papers. "I cannot permit this," he said. "You haven't evaluated the evidence as a true scientist should. Would a true scientist allow the sun to reside at the

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center of the universe? I fear you must undertake a serious revision, Lord Brahe, if you are to align your work with the principles of the Holy Maker."

With his method and observations called into doubt by the bishop's unswerving views, Tycho at last understood the breadth and darkness of the gulf that stood between them; but he must try and bridge that chasm, to make the bishop understand that there was indeed a place for empirical measurement in science.

"Your Holiness," he said, as calmly as he could, "I believe you'll see by my latest calculations, especially those describing the motions of the warrior planet, that the discrepancies so shrewdly detailed in Kopernik's *De revolutionibus* can only be explained by — "

"We are not here to discuss your explanations and calculations, Lord Brahe," said the bishop, raising his hand. "Kopernik made a better canon than he did a scientist, and his heretical notions are of no value or relevance. We are now concerned with your soul."

The bishop dropped the sheaf of paper on the table, his skin stretched like parchment over his bony face as he held the astonomer's gaze. Out in the passage, Tycho heard doleful plainsong emanate from the palace chapel, the brothers joining in a lugubrious chant, praising their Almighty God with a dark and unvarying melody.

"Your Holiness, all my hundreds of observations support Kopernik's heliocentric theory."

"Do not talk to me of heliocentricity," said the bishop. "Let us concern ourselves with your salvation, Lord Brahe. Let us concern ourselves with your Uncle Steen's estate here in Knudstrup and how by royal order, Herritzvad Abbey could be confiscated, just as it was once so easily confiscated from the Benedictine monks. Let us concern ourselves with your mother Beate and her position as Mistress of the Robes to Queen Sophia, and how she could be so easily dismissed if her son were to persist in this blasphemy."

The bishop turned away from Tycho, walked over to the fire, and stirred the embers until the flames leapt up the flue, the wood cracking and popping like the breaking of bones. The confiscation of Herritzvad Abbey from the Benedictine monks still rankled the old bishop, even though it had happened many years ago. Tycho felt like striking the bishop against the back of his head with the flat of his sword, but he kept his weapon sheathed, and stiffened his resolve.

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"I will not be coerced," he said, his voice quiet but firm.

Bishop Anders turned from the fire, his eyes as grim as death. "Lord Brahe, this is not coercion, this is guidance," he said, approaching the table. "We can't have you gain-saying the age-old doctrines of the Church." He lifted the hot poker toward Tycho's face and held it a few inches from the astronomer's right eye. "I won't have the power and prestige of my diocese undercut by a mischievous Lutheran who thinks he understands the heavens better than I do."

"And you have the king's blessing in this?"

"I have the king's blessing in everything," he said, lowering the poker. "Heliocentricity! And the earth to roam like a common vagabond? These are the notions of a madman." The bishop leaned forward, pinning him with his rheumy blue eyes. "And do you know what we do with madmen, Lord Brahe? We put them in leg-irons and lock them in the darkest cell at Skokloster where they never see the stars again."

TYCHO FOUND his brother Magnus standing in the rain next to his horse in exactly the same spot, as if he were unaware of the downpour. Tycho trudged across the yard, numbed by the injustice, struggling to think of a way out; but if he insisted on telling the truth, such as Magnus had revealed it, he would never see the stars again. The bishop was unpredictable and unpleasant; he was also diabolical. If Tycho told the truth he would bring ruin to his uncle and mother. And he couldn't do that, even if as a result his work suffered.

Magnus looked sodden and miserable; but, oh, how Tycho loved him. He took off his cape and swung it around the simpleton's shoulders.

"You ride, Magnus," he said. "I'll lead."

He slapped the saddle and gestured. Magnus' eyes lit up. He liked riding the horse even more than he enjoyed leading it.

They set off from the bishop's palace into the midnight storm. Tycho looked up at the sky; no moon, no stars, no planets, a typical view from the darkest cell at Skokloster asylum. He glanced over his shoulder at Magnus. Coerced. Yet as he looked at his brother, he now had the glimmering of an idea, the half-formed notion of a way out. His step lightened as he marveled at the simplicity of his idea, so simple even a fool could think of it.

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He didn't have to tell the truth. All he had to do was *show* the truth. He would make thousands upon thousands of observations, design and manufacture the finest and most accurate astronomical instruments, find a place far away from the court, far away from this diocese, an island, perhaps, where the ether was clear and the stars beautiful and wondrous, and continue his work undisturbed. So many observations that those who could see with their eyes as well as their minds would come to one inescapable conclusion. He didn't have to tell them. His observations would speak for themselves. His observations wouldn't lie, the way Bishop Anders lied. He would watch and watch, and his brother's season of intelligence would not be wasted, nor the sages of Cassiopeia forgotten. Those who saw with their eyes as well as their minds would understand that Brahe of Knudstrup knew the truth, the heretical, immutable, exalted truth: that the earth roamed with its sister and brother planets like a vagabond and that the sun resided at the center of the universe in all its shining glory.

He turned to Magnus, a smile coming to his face. "I am an eye, brother Magnus," he said. "And I watch." He looked up at the stormy sky. "I watch."

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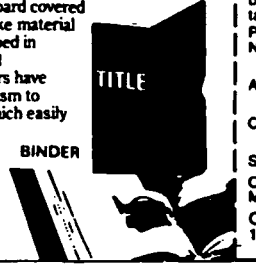

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SCIENCE

JANET & ISAAC ASIMOV

ESSAY 400–A WAY OF THINKING

Science is much more than a body of knowledge. It is a way of thinking.

— Carl Sagan

INTRODUCTORY NOTE:

ISAAC had written 399 science essays for Fantasy & Science Fiction *but was too ill to write the 400th. This troubled him deeply, so — because I was already writing one of his regular science columns — I suggested that we write the 400th essay together, recording his thoughts about science and science writing. Unfortunately, the essay was never written.*

Over two years have passed since Isaac died. Because I still want that 400th essay, I've finally put one together from our discussions and letters, plus an excerpt from his recently published autobiography.

My comments are marked by brackets.

This "essay" is not polished because the letters were not. Long ago, he wrote me about this: "My letters to you are first drafts; straight as it comes and completely unpolished; and I leave it to you to get past the maunderings and potterings and see my meaning. In fact, it is very wonderful to be able to leave it to you to do that — in full confidence and trust."

I leave it to Isaac's readers, in full confidence and trust.

[Janet, 1994. Today the economic state of the world forces governments and institutions to cut back on scientific research, which tends to be funded only if it promises practical, money-making results. Scientists are also hampered by increasing anti-science prejudice, growing as literacy decreases and fears proliferate. People want comforting answers and prom-

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ises instead of truth. Carl Sagan recently summarized the problem by saying, "We live in a society exquisitely dependent on science and technology, in which hardly anyone knows anything about science and technology."

Isaac was in complete agreement with Carl, and spent most of his life trying to help people understand science.]

[From a commencement speech] Science with all its faults has brought education and the arts to more people — a larger percentage — than has ever existed before science. In that respect it is science that is the great humanizer. And, if we are going to solve the problems that science has brought us, it will be done by science and in no other way.

[1966, telling me what he'd said in a letter to Carl Sagan] The brotherhood of science is one of the few ideals that transcend national boundaries and point the way to possible safety amid the dangers that threaten us.

[This is the quote from a published work — *I. Asimov: A Memoir* (which Isaac had called "Scenes of Life"), published by Doubleday in 1994] ...science *can't ever* explain everything and I can give you reasons for that decision...I believe that scientific knowledge has fractal properties; that no matter how much we learn, whatever is left, however small it may seem, is just as infinitely complex as the whole was to start with. That, I think, is the secret of the Universe.

[Helping people understand science had its difficulties. This is from a letter about an article he'd written for *Playboy* and which they wanted revised] ...I wrote a letter to *Playboy* suggesting that in my opinion they ought to do the article I sent them as it stands because I wasn't going to rewrite it into a silly sensational piece of the kind they were asking for. I explained that I had dedicated my life to educating the public and that science must not be viewed as a mysterious black box out of which came toys and goodies, for that way laymen would view scientists as a kind of lab-coated priesthood — and, eventually, fear and hate them. I couldn't connive at that view. I had to *explain* science and *Playboy* owed a duty to its public to have science explained and if most of their readership would rather not trouble their rusty heads, they could look at the Playmate of the Month. That's what she was there for. — Anyway, it was a very stub-

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born and self-righteous letter and I haven't received any answer.

[In an article] I made fun of a reviewer who wanted less of a bang of statistics...and more of a moan of delight. I got a letter from a fan today who sympathized with me and who sent the following quotation from Alfred Noyes (you know, the *Highwayman* guy — which, by the way, turns out to be the favorite poem of Gene Roddenberry, and one he loves to recite thumpingly.) I never came across the quotation and I think it is beautiful and I want to pass it on to you —

> Fools have said
> That knowledge drives out
> wonder from the world;
> They'll say it still, though all
> the dust's ablaze
> With miracles at their feet.

[About a critical letter] ...from someone who says indignantly that if SF were scientifically accurate it wouldn't be SF and that if she wants an education she would go to school. I scowled formidably and sent back a postcard saying, "There is a difference between fiction and ignorance. If you want to be ignorant, that's your business." I work so hard to educate and here are people who would rather be stupid.

[I don't know if the following is Isaac's or something he read, but he said it with fervor] Uncertainty that comes from knowledge (knowing what you don't know) is different from uncertainty coming from ignorance.

[About a talk he gave at a college] I traced the history of science and man (science and *ordinary* man, not science and scholars) through three stages. First there was the stage where science meant *nothing* to the man in the streets and he turned to his various religious leaders for help in protecting him against the universe. The turning point came (according to my thesis) with Franklin's invention of the lightning rod — the first victory of science over a menace to man which had till then seemed unavertable and which had, indeed, been considered the direct artillery of Zeus, Thor, and Yahveh.

And, I added impressively, when the average man saw lightning rods rising over the steeples of the great cathedrals of Europe, he could see with his own eyes that the priests themselves trusted in science rather than in their own holiness, and the battle was over right there. In the last two centuries, religion has retreated

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steadily before science. Also it led to 19th century Utopianism with regard to science. Science was Good and could solve everything.

The fact that science was also Bad, I traced to 1915 and the development of gas warfare, the first time that the average man could see, with the shock of sudden recognition, that a pure development of science could be outrageously bad and without mitigating good.

Since then we have lived in an ambivalent society where Science is both Good and Bad, where it poses us insuperable problems and dangers but where only it offers us the slightest hope of solution. I then looked into the future and pictured a possible ideal society in which work and risk were abolished and in which men slowly lost interest and declined in numbers while robots, who grew to be more and more manlike in appearance and ability, took over the work of the world.

Finally the last man was gone and only the robots, self-repairing and self-perpetuating, were left. And they puzzled over their dim memories of a Golden Age, as the centuries passed. Surely there had once been a race of demi-gods, who never had to work, who never suffered from disease, who did not die but who just fell asleep. How had all that been lost, and left their own race forever condemned to brutal labor?

One of the robots finally got an idea. "You see," he began, "there was this snake..."

And with that I ended the talk.

[Publishers had asked for a book on quasars but Isaac decided to write *The Universe: From Flat Earth to Quasar*]

What I did was to give a history of man's attempt to view the Universe as a whole, from Greek efforts to draw maps of a flat Earth, shaped like a saucer and 5000 miles across, to the entire observable Universe with a diameter of 26,000,000,000 light-years.

Gradually I extended the horizons: the Round Earth in Chapter 1; the Solar System in Chapter 2; the stars in Chapter 3; the Galaxy in Chapters 4 and 5; other galaxies in Chapter 6; questions of cosmogony (the origin and evolution of the Universe—which is the nub of the book) in Chapters 7 through 12. I then followed with a discussion of the various models and theories of the Universe that followed upon the realization that the galaxies receded from us, in Chapters 13 through 15. Finally in Chapters 16 and 17 I discussed the expansion of our knowledge of the Universe that arrived in

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the mid-twentieth century through an understanding of radiation reaching us in forms other than visible light: neutrinos, cosmic rays, x-rays, and gamma rays.

The last two chapters dealt with radio astronomy, with colliding galaxies and exploding galaxies. And *finally* after 100,000 words, I brought up the quasars that I was asked to write the book about. But now, you see, instead of simply writing a journalistic account full of gee-whizzes which (like meringue) will feel and taste good but will leave you hungry, I have a good solid history of cosmology which the careful reader will find will stay with him. And the quasars will fit properly into the background so that he will see its full significance the moment they are mentioned.

Would you like to know what writing problems are like to someone who never suffers from a writing block? Well, I am working on a book on physical biochemistry (of sorts) which involves chapter upon chapter upon chapter dealing with thermodynamics to begin with. Now I am using the historical approach and historically the second law of thermodynamics was discovered before the first law, *but* it makes much more sense to discuss the first law first. How then can I discuss the first law first and the second law second without giving the impression that I am zigzagging in time (which I am). See?

[1966] I've just written my article called "Selenize or Die," which briefly states my thesis that it is important [for scientists] to start a Moon colony, for they will show us how to *really* construct a managed economy and it will be on them that the brunt of further space exploration will fall. The peroration is "Why spend billions to place a man on the moon? If we don't, we may lose the Earth. If we do, we may gain the Universe. You couldn't ask for better odds."

[About giving a talk to a small audience that seemed to possess "unsullied gravity"] ...since I don't prepare my talks I am guided entirely by audience reaction and not even consciously. I just automatically get more and more funny if the audience laughs...or less and less funny if the audience doesn't laugh. This time I got less and less funny and began an increasingly sober discussion of the possible usefulness of the Moon program, ending with the hope that the Moon colony would teach mankind how to live an ecologically sane existence, which brought me into the

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problems of overpopulation and overpollution and I grew very intense indeed...I spoke rapidly and pulled no punches and everyone left shaken up and saying they wouldn't be able to sleep that night.

They should have laughed.

[About an interview with a reporter for a European magazine] She whipped out a recorder and asked if I'd mind and I said, "No." (What the heck, I'm not ashamed of anything I say.) Then I talked freely for two hours, giving her my feelings that...exploring space was something for all mankind and I hated to see it made a football for national rivalries, but perhaps that was the only way in this insane world of doing it at all; and I said that the Moon could never support enough men to make it a way of absorbing our population excess, and that the population explosion had to be solved by 2000 A.D. or else, and that we could not look for help from outer space but had to solve it by then right here on Earth; and that we had to stop polluting water and air and crowding other species recklessly off the face of the Earth; and that extending the life span to 200 years would be of dubious benefit since the population would explode that much faster and extending the life span of a small minority of worthwhile people would create such a problem of "who is to decide" that I dreaded the thought of it; and that in an automated world, boredom would be a painful epidemic disease, and that the worst punishment would be to take a criminal off the "worklists" for the number of years required to fit the crime. — All like that there.

[The reporter] kept saying enthusiastically, "You're the first American who has said such things to me." It made me nervous...people can spout official statements...but I can say what I please; or at least I *will* say what I please.

[About the flap over whether or not flat-worms automatically became conditioned if they ate pieces of other, conditioned worms] ...I viewed this with severe suspicion (my "built-in doubter," you know) but finally decided that the only way it could happen was that RNA molecules (the key to memory) were incorporated whole into the cannibalistic worms since their organization was so low-key that they probably didn't require digestion when their food was so like themselves. To my delight, this turned out to be the most popular explanation by "real scientists." However, [a "very good scientist"] now insists that the work of the

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worm-runners can't be confirmed; that flat-worms can't be conditioned. This gives me some sardonic amusement for, of course, John Campbell jumped on this at the very beginning, convinced that there was some explanation that would upset all of "orthodox science." (He is for anything far-out, not because he values the far-out, but because he wants to see the amateur — like himself — win over the professionals who wouldn't let him finish MIT.)

Also, have you read that the meteorite in which traces of life were discovered turns out to have been hoaxed a century ago? It is another example of the value of routine doubting. My thesis, in case you've forgotten, is not doubt-for-doubt's-sake, but doubt as a necessary barrier which the valid can overcome and the non-valid cannot. The more a finding seems to destroy the basis of the scientific structure, the higher the barrier of doubt. Of course one must remember that "doubt" is *not* synonymous with "refusal to listen."

I was on a two-hour radio show and discussed the origin of life...talked learnedly and rapidly about the development through chance of nucleic acid molecules, of evolution by natural selection, etc. etc. etc. In the second hour the listeners phoned in questions, and some of them were from Fundamentalists who were simply furious with me. They quoted from the Bible and denounced me as someone who would steal the beauty of the universe (as though the conceptions of evolution and the long history of the stars were not infinitely more beautiful than the story of a petulant God making and destroying a pint-sized basketball of a world.) One questioner, her voice shaking, would refer to me only as *that man* and addressed her questions (or rather her denunciations) only to the announcer. You would have been proud of me, though. I was calm and polite and smooth and in answering these people. I kept saying, "[Scientists] neither back the Bible nor refute it. The Bible doesn't concern us one way or the other." Of course that reduced them to gibbering fury and the announcer would then cut them off.

The trouble is these people have a comfortable little world of miracles and literal-word-of-the-Bible and associate only with others who live in the same world and go to a tiny, Fundamentalist church on Sunday and (like the green peas in the pod who thought the whole universe was green) honestly think that all the world thinks as they do. They don't read books on the scientific view, or

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go to lectures, or attend courses — and then, they have the radio on and to their disbelief and horror, someone is spouting blasphemy at them and speaking of life originating by chance and mankind developing through the blind forces of natural selection and never mentioning God.

It's a wonder they don't break down at the mere fact that I am not being struck by lightning. Anyway, I think I brought some fresh air into the minds of a number who were not irrevocably wedded to ignorance. It was an interesting experience.

[1970] I have just received a very strange fan letter from a "Bible fundamentalist" who says, "After years of admiring you and your goodness in putting your knowledge into layman's terms so many of us could enjoy this great world of science with you, I am finally dropping these lines to tell you how much I appreciate what you have contributed to my faith in the literal word of God."

Dearest doctor — where have I gone wrong?

[Thirty years ago I wrote Isaac a letter he praised, so I'll include an excerpt:

...as you have pointed out in so many ways in your various articles...exposure to scientific method does alter the way one thinks, for the better. Even if one is disgustingly human in the primitive, fallible, unreasoning sense, nevertheless if one has once acquired the tool of scientific method — reasoning and experimenting and doubting and questioning — then at least it is there if one has the guts to use it. My last sentence amuses me. People — even I — say "disgustingly human" meaning all the primitive things. But scientific method is a human accomplishment and cannot be divorced from "being human."]

[In another letter I wrote to Isaac about an argument I'd had with a Fundamentalist relative:

...Some people will always believe any insane system if it happens to fit their needs enough, especially if their needs are very neurotic...but fewer people would be taken in if they got a thorough grounding in scientific principles in childhood. Every single child born in this age should have a rough idea of what scientific method is, so that their thinking runs along — at least vaguely — lines similar to those used by scientists when confronted with hypotheses, new data, new questions, etc. Not that scientists aren't prey to emotionalism and other forms of distorted thinking, but at least they have

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the *tools* of thinking which they *can* use if they are not too anxious and frightened. My cousin doesn't have these tools and there is no use arguing with him, because he has no adequate means of appraising your reasoning or his own.]

[Isaac's response]...You and I are alike children of Thales, for he was the first known rationalist; the first to attempt to explain the universe without calling upon the supernatural; the first to believe, *by faith*, that the workings of the universe could be understood by reason. We share the same heritage, you and I, and our ancestors are men who withstood persecution and derision, who labored under difficulties and often without any sort of appreciation, who were rarely enriched and often impoverished by their work. In writing my biographies [of great scientists], I was in a sense writing the stories of our ancestors and was aware, as I was doing so, of a Mystic bond (well, I can think of no other word) that bound me to all those men of the past and to all the men of the time yet to come — those very, very few who are rationalists and who work at it.

[1963] A friend of mine commented idly that my book *The Human Brain* had made clear the meaning of EMF for the first time. As soon as I could get hold of the book myself I quickly looked up EMF in the index and turned to the page and read it, with great delight; feeling that I was sharing a learning experience.

How sad it is that for one reason or another (social, personal, philosophical. I don't know — *you're* the psychiatrist) learning usually becomes associated with pain, work, and boredom, so that as soon as school is over and enforced learning put to an end, the average person thankfully puts it all behind and proceeds to forget whatever he or she has learned, above the barest minimum of reading, writing, and third-grade arithmetic. (Really, for most people, there is no way of telling from their conversation or work that they have ever progressed beyond the third grade.) But I am not saying this to criticize; but rather to sympathize; for the loss is theirs, not mine.

It is not even *knowing* that really adds a joy to life, but the ability and eagerness to *learn*. For instance... [A friend's astronomy article] works out calculations that are of only minimal interest to me; but what does stay with me is the idea of Earth and Moon as two islands in the empty volume of a single body circling the Sun. It's just a way of looking at matters that never occurred to me

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but which fascinates me now that it has been put into my mind. It adds to my picture of the universe; it gives me all the pleasure of new knowledge that a poem might give to one of literary bent or a sudden revelation might give to one of mystical bent. To learn is to broaden, to experience more, to snatch new aspects of life for yourself. To refuse to learn or to be relieved at not having to learn is to commit a form of suicide; in the long run, a more meaningful type of suicide than the mere ending of physical life.

I am now writing an *F&SF* article on...a subject I do not understand very well, but by the time I have written the article, I *will* understand it. In fact, I sometimes think my articles are a vast scheme of self-education. It works, too. There is nothing like writing an article on a subject for forcing yourself to think that subject through clearly.

All that is, has developed out of the random application of the laws of the universe, in my belief. I find the hypothesis of a directing intelligence to be more implausible than the hypothesis of a non-directing random process that just happens to be here at this point in time. It might have been somewhere else, but it happens to be here...

...We must distinguish between scientific knowledge and all knowledge. Scientific knowledge is only one sub-species of the genus. It is knowledge gained in a particular way. There is knowledge gained in other ways. For instance, a young man in love *knows* that his young woman is the most wonderful one in the world. He doesn't measure her in any way; he knows by a reaction in himself that is indescribable, let alone measurable.

[About a fan letter] He responds to my recent article in which I take off on mystical explanations of the universe. The fan points out that the Sun corresponds to the brain; the nine planets to the nine major openings in the body (two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, mouth, and, I presume, urethra and anus — the young man, apparently, having never looked closely at the feminine urethra and environs, completely missed a tenth opening, in the female at least), the asteroids (as an exploded planet) to the umbilicus, as an opening that once was but is no longer (Hmm, could the asteroids signify that tenth opening, broken up to indicate it is present in only one sex?). He also maintains that if we could count all the asteroids, comets, and smaller

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bodies these would correspond exactly to the number of pores in the skin — the minor openings.

I am sending back a postcard saying, "Excellently reasoned! And as the umbilicus is in the middle of the body, so is the asteroid belt in the middle of the Solar System."

[1968] I have so far received two letters from people protesting my cavalier dismissal of Velikovsky, the first from a sociologist and the second from a philosopher, who protested that I was giving Velikovsky the dogmatic treatment that scientists were using to suppress him, and pointing out in his favor that he was being invited to speak at numerous colleges by heads of departments and was greeted with large and enthusiastic crowds.

In my answer, I said he couldn't have it both ways. If Velikovsky was constantly being invited to speak to large crowds at college campuses, then in what way was he being "suppressed"? And if large and enthusiastic crowds were the measure of truth then I wouldn't waste my time with Velikovsky, I would go straight to Billy Graham.

What I *didn't* say, because I thought it would be too cruel, was that the pro-Velikovsky clique was drawn almost entirely from non-scientist scholars like my friend the philosopher. There was the time when philosophers were the cream of scholar-hood and now the very word "philosopher" induces an almost involuntarily mocking smile which may not always be justified but which exists. The physical scientist is the new intellectual elite (also not necessarily justified, but a fact) and the philosopher, nose out of joint, is only too glad to jump on the bandwagon of a theory that seems to make out physical scientists to be a) stupidly wrong, and b) criminally persecuting.

[Dear Dr. Asimov, why on Earth did you bother to answer the letter writer who lectured you about your attitude toward Velikovsky? In the five minutes you typewrote your answer, stuffed it in an envelope, licked the stamp, and sealed it, you could have written lots of words for your new book. How many, at your rate of typing speed? You're the mathematician, not I. Figure it out. Be guilty.]

[In the margin of my letter Isaac wrote next to the "why"] Because I'm compulsive.

[About a review of one of his science books] I sat down and wrote a perfectly furious letter...I pointed

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out that facts were facts and that I was shocked to know that he favored altering facts to fit theory and that this worried me because in the same issue *he* had an article favoring the widespread use of pesticides and I wasn't sure it was safe to listen to him...

After I wrote the letter, and addressed an airmail envelope and sealed the envelope, I found my fury evaporating. I reread the review and found it was stupid but not as evil as I had thought. He had even used the adjective "interesting" at one point so that the review was not solidly bad. So now I have to nerve myself to tear up an envelope with a perfectly good stamp on it.

P.S. I've just torn it up.

[He loved Benjamin Franklin]... Just the other day I learned something new about him. During the American Revolution, Captain Cook was engaged in his phenomenal sweeps across the Pacific Ocean. He was the first of the great modern scientific explorers, searching not for gold, trade or colonies but for knowledge. In those days, American privateers were scouring the seas looking for British craft to sink out of a little bit of patriotism and a whole lot of love of loot. Captain Cook, however, went untouched and undisturbed, officially protected against harm by the American revolutionaries, at the advice and insistence of Benjamin Franklin.

Franklin quite well realized that the search for knowledge (of the universe by scientists, of man's senses and emotions by writers and artists, of man's ethics and behavior by psychologists, philosophers and — ugh — theologians) was mankind's highest purpose in life and was what made man man and not merely another animal. Most of all he realized, and made the American government realize, that it stood even higher than purely national interest.

We're living in a time when science has made "purely national interest" completely obsolete, only not enough of us realize it. Men like Kennedy and Khrushchev realize that "purely national interest" is a long name for suicide and are trying (with the greatest possible difficulty and reluctance) to place the good of humanity first. Then there is another group who also recognize the obsolescence of ordinary nations but wish to try another division on the basis of color, with Communist China, the Union of South Africa, the American Southland all on the side of the devils.

[About *Dr. Strangelove*] I am by

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no means sympathetic with the view that one must never make fun (let alone savage fun) of scientists. Much as I admire, love, and revere science and scientists, I recognize perfectly well that both science and scientists — like *all* subjects — are fair targets for the satirist. Indeed, to exempt scientists from satire, or even from malicious probing, would be extremely dangerous for science. To make a religion out of it would be to enthrone its worst aspects — its authoritarianism, its unapproachability, etc.

And in particular, I myself realize the danger that science may become — willingly — the handmaiden of nationalism and the great danger to humanity. There *are* scientists who recognize their first duty to an arbitrary segment of the human race, rather than to mankind generally; and there *are* scientists who would put their own pride in their own creations, or theories, or their own wounded self-love above the best interests of mankind. Yes, I am thinking of Teller, of course, and I wonder if Peter Sellers is thinking of him as well as of Werner von Braun, for instance.

[In another letter] The thing that gets me is that people are ready to consider scientists evil for their part in the bomb, but scientists are those who have rebelled against the bomb (not all of them, of course) and fought against it. It was the politicians that actually made the decision to use it, and the military that used it — and where is a single politician or military man who has ever regretted publicly his part in the atomic bomb and its use? It is my theory that the type of mind which is today drawn to science, which in ancient times was drawn to philosophy, in medieval times to theology — is not only the best mind but the good-est mind. (Which, of course, does not mean that there are not rats in the ranks of science.)

[About an old sf movie] The Earth *can't* leave its orbit and swirl toward the sun as a result of anything, anything, anything that happens on the Earth. An external force must be applied. The Earth can be blown into tiny pieces as a result of actions on the Earth and some of the pieces may hurtle toward the sun, but then an equivalent mass must hurtle in the opposite direction and the center of gravity of all the pieces will continue to move majestically about the sun just as it is doing. Damn it, not to know this (and nobody in the movie capital does) is to be pre-Galilean. It is equivalent in the artistic world of

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saying that Mozart wrote *Götterdämmerung*. And it's no use saying, "Oh, well, the stupid jerks who watch the picture won't know the difference and wouldn't care if they did." In this present world, scientific illiteracy is a sin and anyone who encourages the spread of scientific illiteracy is a criminal.

...A lot of good it does us to try to teach legitimate physics in schools, when the movies do things that prove they never heard of the conservation of angular momentum.

[About vandalism and terrorism] The whole world is being burned down or torn up or broken to pieces and people don't care. I have reached the point where I can almost hope that the death rate goes up quickly, *very* quickly, with maximum damage to humanity and minimum damage to the rest of the animal kingdom and the inanimate environment so that the old planet has a chance to recover. I am becoming misanthropic. Individual human beings are becoming monsters incapable of any kind of motive except that of grabbing what they can from the universal wreckage.

[After a discussion in 1961] I have always been quite impatient with philosophy and philosophers, going no further in my thoughts than to reach certain unpleasant stereotypes which consisted, chiefly, of having them *far* inferior to scientists. The necessity of philosophy, the fact that science is based on a philosophy, and can only discuss its results in terms of philosophy — that I myself am consistently philosophical in my writing — all these things were at once so obvious and apparent that I am dreadfully ashamed at...having had to have it pointed out...

[But we did sometimes argue in letters and he usually won] You must not use the phrase "19th-century mechanists" as though it were a dirty word. The 19th-century mechanists were a heck of a lot closer to the mark than were their competitors, the vitalists, the theologians, and the mystics. By a "mechanist" I mean someone who thinks that the behavior of the universe can be interpreted through a series of general statements which we can call "laws of nature." That the universe and its component parts always behave so as to agree with the laws of nature and cannot disobey. This negates any thought of "free will" or a "directing intelligence" or a "god" if you want me to be blunt. It also implies that man, as part of the universe, lacks free will and cannot disobey the laws of na-

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ture. In short, the universe has characteristics in common with those we recognize in a machine.

This view of matters was emotionally offensive to many who felt bound and determined to consider themselves as more than machines, as equipped with free will and souls and all the rest. Consequently there was vast relief among many philosophers when it turned out that the 19th-century mechanists didn't know as much as they thought they did. (Nobody does, and the odd part is that 19th-century mechanists were a lot less arrogant in this respect than their opponents...)

The great addition that had to be made can be summed up in the one word "probability." The gas laws weren't as absolute as they seemed, once they were interpreted as the result of random motion of particles. They fuzzed out into probability. The uncertainty principle fuzzed everything out into probability.

This didn't mean the universe was not a machine. It simply meant that we didn't know as much about machines as we thought we did. The Universe is governed by uncertainty in that we can't say yes or no, but so are all machines. We can set up mathematical expressions that precisely express the probabilities. We can't stop the fuzziness from being fuzzy, but we can describe the nature of the fuzziness. And the Universe is *still* a machine; we just know more about machines, that's all. So I'm a 20th-century mechanist—and a very thoroughgoing one—and I will not admit that there is any reason to suppose that everything in the universe cannot be satisfactorily explained on the basis of material things (with energy and matter both considered material).

In other words, in order for arrangement, order, interrelationship and all such abstractions to have meaning, there must be order and arrangement of *certain material objects.* And you will never truly understand order and arrangement until you know what it is you are ordering and arranging.

For instance, it is quite possible to study symptoms and cures of diseases without knowing anything about the cause of the disease. Great successes can be achieved even. Vaccination and quinine were introduced when only superficial knowledge existed concerning smallpox and malaria. However, it was only after the germ theory of disease was introduced that medicine became more than empirical guesswork. Which was more important, good doctor? Vaccination or germ theory? And, if it were possible by skimping on re-

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search into vaccination to have discovered the germ theory twenty years sooner, would that not have been beneficial in the long run?

The greatest discovery in biology was the theory of evolution which was essentially an order-and-arrangement discovery, yet it could not have been made unless and until the concept of species was introduced.

To be sure, life is more complex than the DNA molecule, just as matter is more complex than the atom, since matter includes all the interatomic forces. However, until the atom is understood, the interatomic forces will not be. The study of life will remain fuzzy and mystical until we know exactly what the fundamental basis of life is. *Then* we can turn to the order and arrangement that makes up all the higher subtlety of life and *finally* understand them. And if we skimp on the order and arrangement now in order to more quickly understand what we are ordering and arranging, we will get there faster in the long run.

Or, to give another example, consider that the great advances in chemistry were made in three stages. First, after the concept of element had been introduced; second, after the concept of the atom had been introduced; and thirdly, after the concept of the electronically charged subatomic particle had been introduced. In no case do we say that sulfuric acid is *really* a mixture of elements (it isn't) or *merely* a conglomeration of atoms (it isn't) or *only* a mass of electrons and protons (it isn't). It is all these things plus organization, yes. But every time we found out a little more about what was being organized, we found out a great deal more about the organization.

Now the traditional biologists can continue what they are doing, but all the problems they strive so painstakingly to solve will fall into place without difficulty when the DNA boys finally solve their molecular biology. And anything we can do to help along the DNA boys is for the benefit of the traditional biologists as well.

[After a similar argument, I agreed with him and he answered:] Thank you for trying to understand my commitment to the battle of Reason against Chaos, even when I show the battle at its worst by dashing suddenly at windmills. And I shall try, with all my heart, to understand your commitment to the battle of the Heart against all the Blindness and Indifference of the world...if at times we veer apart in the comparative stress we lay upon Heart and Mind, I know we will find our way back to

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the common battle of Good (of Heart and Mind) against the Evil (of Indifference and Ignorance).

In [the letter column of a reputable science journal] an argument rages between the traditionalists of biology and the molecular biologists. The traditionalists insist they are not vitalists and point out that the molecular biologists are biochemists by training and know virtually nothing of biology. The molecular biologists insist that the traditionalists *are* vitalists and stubbornly insist on the molecular biological road to ultimate biological truth.

At first blush, I am heart and soul with the molecular biologist, and yet as I think of it in the light of what I have learned [during our arguments], I find both sides incomplete. It is certainly truth that the average molecular biologist is a chemist rather than a biologist, but surely this gives the traditional biologist a wonderful chance. Let him learn molecular biology and adapt it to his own knowledge of traditional biology. Let the two merge; for all learning is one, and though there may be enemies among scholars there can be no enmity among scholarship.

As an example from history, when Pasteur (a chemist) advanced the germ theory of disease, the traditional doctors may well have pointed out that Pasteur was a microscopist who could see answers only in the microscopic world and that he knew nothing about medicine itself. True! But Robert Koch took Pasteur's bacteriological work and applied it to medicine in systematic fashion and revolutionized the art.

I was on local radio tonight and people from the listening audience called in, all of them saying how great I was. Still, one of the guys, after explaining that he had read me for years, went on to insist on giving his views on flying saucers which were as kooky as possible. We were going to destroy the sun and cause a disruption in the fabric of time and that was what the people in the flying saucers were trying to prevent and he knew that I knew this perfectly well but might be afraid to say so. I pushed him off as gently as I could but, my goodness, if people think that *this* is what reading me for years brings people to, they may burn my books.

[He had complained about the price of fame, so I reminded him of what Henry Fielding said: "Do thou teach me not only to foresee but to enjoy; nay, even to feed on future praise. Comfort me by a solemn assurance that when the little parlour

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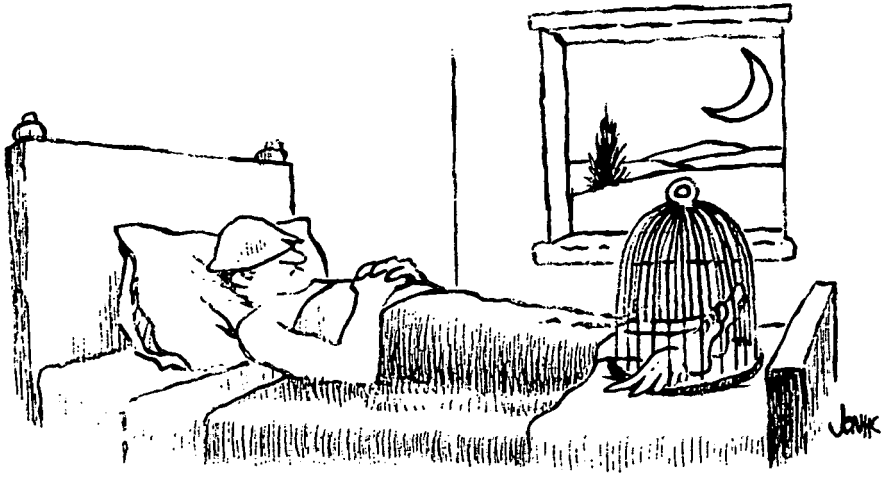
in which I sit at this instant shall be reduced to a worse furnished box, I shall be read with honour by those who never knew nor saw me, and whom I shall neither know nor see." Isaac replied:]

How minds can meet and agree across the centuries! Isn't it much greater to be Homo sapiens than to be part of any artificial subclass thereof?

[About a fan's letter praising one of his books on science] I am absurdly gratified whenever someone tells me that the book has "reawakened a forgotten joy in learning" because that is what I try to do; that is my mission; only how do I go about saying so without sounding priggish and mawkish? We live in a society in which it is impermissible to be idealistic; where to wish to do good and to help one's fellow-man in any way is so laughed out of court that those who most wish to do so (for the very selfish reason that it makes them feel good and gives meaning to their life) must clothe their actions in selfish terminology as I have just done and must live constantly in fear of being accused of hypocrisy or worse...Oh, Dr. J, it would be so much better to give than to receive, if it were two different actions; if it weren't that only by giving can one receive, and only by receiving that one can give. I want to give in so many ways, on so many levels, to so many recipients — love and joy and knowledge — and in so doing I find love and joy and knowledge, for in the most concrete of the three, knowledge, it is absolute truth that I have never written a book that didn't teach me far more than it taught any reader.



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It has been seven years since Ursula K. Le Guin's elegant fiction has graced our pages. Her last offering here was the Hugo-award winning "Buffalo Gals Won't You Come Out Tonight," which appeared in our November 1987 issue.

"Solitude" is another important story for the field of sf. It also inspired Bryn Barnard's cover.

Solitude

By Ursula K. Le Guin

An addition to "POVERTY: The Second Report on Eleven-Soro" by Mobile Entselenne'temharyonoterregwis Leaf, by her daughter, Serenity.

MY MOTHER, A FIELD ETHnologist, took the difficulty of learning anything about the people of Eleven-Soro as a personal challenge. The fact that she used her children to meet that challenge might be seen as selfishness or as selflessness. Now that I have read her report I know that she finally thought she had done wrong. Knowing what it cost her, I wish she knew my gratitude to her for allowing me to grow up as a person.

Shortly after a robot probe reported people of the Hainish Descent on the eleventh planet of the Soro system, she joined the orbital crew as back-up for the three First Observers down onplanet. She had spent four years in the tree-cities of nearby Huthu. My brother In Joy Born was eight years old and I was five; she wanted a year or two of ship duty so we could spend some time in a Hainish-style school. My brother had enjoyed the rainforests of Huthu very much, but though he could brachiate he could barely read, and we were all bright blue with skin-fungus. While Borny learned to read and I learned to

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wear clothes and we all had antifungus treatments, my mother became as intrigued by Eleven-Soro as the Observers were frustrated by it.

All this is in her report, but I will say it as I learned it from her, which helps me remember and understand. The language had been recorded by the probe and the Observers had spent a year learning it. The many dialectical variations excused their accents and errors, and they reported that language was not a problem. Yet there was a communication problem. The two men found themselves isolated, faced with suspicion or hostility, unable to form any connection with the native men, all of whom lived in solitary houses as hermits or in pairs. Finding communities of adolescent males, they tried to make contact with them, but when they entered the territory of such a group the boys either fled or rushed desperately at them trying to kill them. The women, who lived in what they called "dispersed villages," drove them away with volleys of stones as soon as they came anywhere near the houses. "I believe," one of them reported, "that the only community activity of the Sorovians is throwing rocks at men."

Neither of them succeeded in having a conversation of more than three exchanges with a man. One of them mated with a woman who came by his camp; he reported that though she made unmistakable and insistent advances, she seemed disturbed by his attempts to converse, refused to answer his questions, and left him, he said, "as soon as she got what she came for."

The woman Observer was allowed to settle in an unused house in a "village" (auntring) of seven houses. She made excellent observations of daily life, insofar as she could see any of it, and had several conversations with adult women and many with children; but she found that she was never asked into another woman's house, nor expected to help or ask for help in any work. Conversation concerning normal activities was unwelcome to the other women; the children, her only informants, called her Aunt Crazy-Jabber. Her aberrant behavior caused increasing distrust and dislike among the women, and they began to keep their children away from her. She left. "There's no way," she told my mother, "for an adult to learn anything. They don't ask questions, they don't answer questions. Whatever they learn, they learn when they're children."

Aha! said my mother to herself, looking at Bomy and me. And she requested a family transfer to Eleven-Soro with Observer status. The Stabiles interviewed her extensively by ansible, and talked with Bomy and even with

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me—I don't remember it, but she told me I told the Stabiles all about my new stockings—and agreed to her request. The ship was to stay in close orbit, with the previous Observers in the crew, and she was to keep radio contact with it, daily if possible.

I have a dim memory of the tree-city, and of playing with what must have been a kitten or a ghole-kit on the ship; but my first clear memories are of our house in the auntring. It is half underground, half aboveground, with wattle-and-daub walls. Mother and I are standing outside it in the warm sunshine. Between us is a big mudpuddle, into which Borny pours water from a basket; then he runs off to the creek to get more water. I muddle the mud with my hands, deliciously, till it is thick and smooth. I pick up a big double handful and slap it onto the walls where the sticks show through. Mother says, "That's good! That's right!" in our new language, and I realize that this is work, and I am doing it. I am repairing the house. I am making it right, doing it right. I am a competent person.

I have never doubted that, so long as I lived there.

We are inside the house at night, and Borny is talking to the ship on the radio, because he misses talking the old language, and anyway he is supposed to tell them stuff. Mother is making a basket and swearing at the split reeds. I am singing a song to drown out Borny so nobody in the auntring hears him talking funny, and anyway I like singing. I learned this song this afternoon in Hyuru's house. I play every day with Hyuru. "Be aware, listen, listen, be aware," I sing. When Mother stops swearing she listens, and then she turns on the recorder. There is a little fire still left from cooking dinner, which was lovely pigi root, I never get tired of pigi. It is dark and warm and smells of pigi and of burning duhur, which is a strong, sacred smell to drive out magic and bad feelings, and as I sing "Listen, be aware," I get sleepier and sleepier and lean against Mother, who is dark and warm and smells like Mother, strong and sacred, full of good feelings.

Our daily life in the auntring was repetitive. On the ship, later, I learned that people who live in artificially complicated situations call such a life "simple." I never knew anybody, anywhere I have been, who found life simple. I think a life or a time looks simple when you leave out the details, the way a planet looks smooth, from orbit.

Certainly our life in the auntring was easy, in the sense that our needs came easily to hand. There was plenty of food to be gathered or grown and

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prepared and cooked, plenty of temas to pick and rett and spin and weave for clothes and bedding, plenty of reeds to make baskets and thatch with; we children had other children to play with, mothers to look after us, and a great deal to learn. None of this is simple, though it's all easy enough, when you know how to do it, when you are aware of the details.

It was not easy for my mother. It was hard for her, and complicated. She had to pretend she knew the details while she was learning them, and had to think how to report and explain this way of living to people in another place who didn't understand it. For Borny it was easy until it got hard because he was a boy. For me it was all easy. I learned the work and played with the children and listened to the mothers sing.

The First Observer had been quite right: there was no way for a grown woman to learn how to make her soul. Mother couldn't go listen to another mother sing, it would have been too strange. The aunts all knew she hadn't been brought up well, and some of them taught her a good deal without her realizing it. They had decided her mother must have been irresponsible and had gone on scouting instead of settling in an auntring, so that her daughter didn't get educated properly. That's why even the most aloof of the aunts always let me listen with their children, so that I could become an educated person. But of course they couldn't ask another adult into their houses. Borny and I had to tell her all the songs and stories we learned, and then she would tell them to the radio, or we told them to the radio while she listened to us. But she never got it right, not really. How could she, trying to learn it after she'd grown up, and after she'd always lived with magicians?

"Be aware!" she would imitate my solemn and probably irritating imitation of the aunts and the big girls. "Be aware! How many times a day do they say that? Be aware of *what?* They aren't aware of what the ruins are, their own history, — they aren't aware of each other! They don't even talk to each other! Be aware, indeed!"

When I told her the stories of the Before Time that Aunt Sadne and Aunt Noyit told their daughters and me, she often heard the wrong things in them. I told her about the People, and she said, "Those are the ancestors of the people here now." When I said, "There aren't any people here now," she didn't understand. "There are persons here now," I said, but she still didn't understand.

Borny liked the story about the Man Who Lived with Women, how he

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kept some women in a pen, the way some persons keep rats in a pen for eating, and all of them got pregnant, and they each had a hundred babies, and the babies grew up as horrible monsters and ate the man and the mothers and each other. Mother explained to us that that was a parable of the human overpopulation of this planet thousands of years ago. "No, it's not," I said, "it's a moral story." — "Well, yes," Mother said. "The moral is, don't have too many babies." — "No, it's not," I said. "Who could have a hundred babies even if they wanted to? The man was a sorceror. He did magic. The women did it with him. So of course their children were monsters."

The key, of course, is the word "tekell," which translates so nicely into the Hainish word "magic," an art or power that violates natural law. It was hard for Mother to understand that some persons truly consider most human relationships unnatural; that marriage, for instance, or government, can be seen as an evil spell woven by sorcerors. It is hard for her people to believe magic.

The ship kept asking if we were all right, and every now and then a Stabile would hook up the ansible to our radio and grill Mother and us. She always convinced them that she wanted to stay, for despite her frustrations, she was doing the work the First Observers had not been able to do, and Bomy and I were happy as mudfish, all those first years. I think Mother was happy too, once she got used to the slow pace and the indirect way she had to learn things. She was lonely, missing other grown-ups to talk to, and told us that she would have gone crazy without us. If she missed sex she never showed it. I think, though, that her Report is not very complete about sexual matters, perhaps because she was troubled by them. I know that when we first lived in the auntring, two of the aunts, Hedimi and Behyu, used to meet to make love, and Behyu courted my mother; but Mother didn't understand, because Behyu wouldn't talk the way Mother wanted to talk. She couldn't understand having sex with a person whose house you wouldn't enter.

Once when I was nine or so, and had been listening to some of the older girls, I asked her why didn't she go out scouting. "Aunt Sadne would look after us," I said, hopefully. I was tired of being the uneducated woman's daughter. I wanted to live in Aunt Sadne's house and be just like the other children.

"Mothers don't scout," she said, scornfully, like an aunt.

"Yes, they do, sometimes," I insisted. "They have to, or how could they have more than one baby?"

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"They go to settled men near the auntring. Behyu went back to the Red Knob Hill Man when she wanted a second child. Sadne goes and sees Downriver Lame Man when she wants to have sex. They know the men around here. None of the mothers scout."

I realized that in this case she was right and I was wrong, but I stuck to my point. "Well, why don't you go see Downriver Lame Man? Don't you ever want sex? Migi says she wants it all the time."

"Migi is seventeen," Mother said drily. "Mind your own nose." She sounded exactly like all the other mothers.

Men, during my childhood, were a kind of uninteresting mystery to me. They turned up a lot in the Before Time stories, and the singing-circle girls talked about them; but I seldom saw any of them. Sometimes I'd glimpse one when I was foraging, but they never came near the auntring. In summer the Downriver Lame Man would get lonesome waiting for Aunt Sadne and would come lurking around, not very far from the auntring — not in the bush or down by the river, of course, where he might be mistaken for a rogue and stoned — but out in the open, on the hillsides, where we could all see who he was. Hyuru and Didsu, Aunt Sadne's daughters, said she had had sex with him when she went out scouting the first time, and always had sex with him and never tried any of the other men of the settlement.

She had told them, too, that the first child she bore was a boy, and she drowned it, because she didn't want to bring up a boy and send him away. They felt queer about that and so did I, but it wasn't an uncommon thing. One of the stories we learned was about a drowned boy who grew up underwater, and seized his mother when she came to bathe, and tried to hold her under till she too drowned; but she escaped.

At any rate, after the Downriver Lame Man had sat around for several days on the hillsides, singing long songs and braiding and unbraiding his hair, which was long too, and shone black in the sun, Aunt Sadne always went off for a night or two with him, and came back looking cross and self-conscious.

Aunt Noyit explained to me that Downriver Lame Man's songs were magic; not the usual bad magic, but what she called the great good spells. Aunt Sadne never could resist his spells. "But he hasn't half the charm of some men I've known," said Aunt Noyit, smiling reminiscently.

Our diet, though excellent, was very low in fat, which Mother thought might explain the rather late onset of puberty; girls seldom menstruated

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before they were fifteen, and boys often weren't mature till they were considerably older than that. But the women began looking askance at boys as soon as they showed any signs at all of adolescence. First Aunt Hedimi, who was always grim, then Aunt Noyit, then even Aunt Sadne began to turn away from Borny, to leave him out, not answering when he spoke. "What are you doing playing with the children?" old Aunt Dnemi asked him so fiercely that he came home in tears. He was not quite fourteen.

Sadne's younger daughter Hyuru was my soulmate, my best friend, you would say. Her elder sister Didsu, who was in the singing circle now, came and talked to me one day, looking serious. "Borny is very handsome," she said. I agreed proudly.

"Very big, very strong," she said, "stronger than I am."

I agreed proudly again, and then I began to back away from her.

"I'm not doing magic, Ren," she said.

"Yes you are," I said. "I'll tell your mother!"

Didsu shook her head. "I'm trying to speak truly. If my fear causes your fear, I can't help it. It has to be so. We talked about it in the singing circle. I don't like it," she said, and I knew she meant it; she had a soft face, soft eyes, she had always been the gentlest of us children. "I wish he could be a child," she said. "I wish I could. But we can't."

"Go be a stupid old woman, then," I said, and ran away from her. I went to my secret place down by the river and cried. I took the holies out of my soulbag and arranged them. One holy — it doesn't matter if I tell you — was a crystal that Borny had given me, clear at the top, cloudy purple at the base. I held it a long time and then I gave it back. I dug a hole under a boulder, and wrapped the holy in duhur leaves inside a square of cloth I tore out of my kilt, beautiful, fine cloth Hyuru had woven and sewn for me. I tore the square right from the front, where it would show. I gave the crystal back, and then sat a long time there near it. When I went home I said nothing of what Didsu had said. But Borny was very silent, and my mother had a worried look. "What have you done to your kilt, Ren?" she asked. I raised my head a little and did not answer; she started to speak again, and then did not. She had finally learned not to talk to a person who chose to be silent.

Borny didn't have a soulmate, but he had been playing more and more often with the two boys nearest his age, Ednede who was a year or two older, a slight, quiet boy, and Bit who was only eleven, but boisterous and reckless.

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The three of them went off somewhere all the time. I hadn't paid much attention, partly because I was glad to be rid of Bit. Hyuru and I had been practicing being aware, and it was tiresome to always have to be aware of Bit yelling and jumping around. He never could leave anyone quiet, as if their quietness took something from him. His mother, Hedimi, had educated him, but she wasn't a good singer or story-teller like Sadne and Noyit, and Bit was too restless to listen even to them. Whenever he saw me and Hyuru trying to slow-walk or sitting being aware, he hung around making noise till we got mad and told him to go, and then he jeered, "Dumb girls!"

I asked Borny what he and Bit and Ednede did, and he said, "Boy stuff."

"Like what?"

"Practicing."

"Being aware?"

After a while he said, "No."

"Practicing what, then?"

"Wrestling. Getting strong. For the boygroup." He looked gloomy, but after a while he said, "Look," and showed me a knife he had hidden under his mattress. "Ednede says you have to have a knife, then nobody will challenge you. Isn't it a beauty?" It was metal, old metal from the People, shaped like a reed, pounded out and sharpened down both edges, with a sharp point. A piece of polished flintshrub wood had been bored and fitted on the handle to protect the hand. "I found it in an empty man's-house," he said. "I made the wooden part." He brooded over it lovingly. Yet he did not keep it in his soulbag.

"What do you *do* with it?" I asked, wondering why both edges were sharp, so you'd cut your hand if you used it.

"Keep off attackers," he said.

"Where was the empty man's-house?"

"Way over across Rocky Top."

"Can I go with you if you go back?"

"No," he said, not unkindly, but absolutely.

"What happened to the man? Did he die?"

"There was a skull in the creek. We think he slipped and drowned."

He didn't sound quite like Borny. There was something in his voice like a grown-up; melancholy; reserved. I had gone to him for reassurance, but came away more deeply anxious. I went to Mother and asked her, "What do

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Men weren't all ignorant and crazy, the way Mother thought. They didn't talk much, but they knew a lot.

they do in the boygroups?"

"Perform natural selection," she said, not in my language but in hers, in a strained tone. I didn't always understand Hainish any more and had no idea what she meant, but the tone of her voice upset me; and to my horror I saw she had begun to cry silently. "We have to move, Serenity," she said — she was still talking Hainish without realizing it. " There isn't any reason why a family can't move, is there? Women just move in and move out as they please. Nobody cares what anybody does. Nothing is anybody's business. Except hounding the boys out of town!"

I understood most of what she said, but got her to say it in my language; and then I said, "But anywhere we went, Borny would be the same age, and size, and everything."

"Then we'll leave," she said fiercely. "Go back to the ship."

I drew away from her. I had never been afraid of her before: she had never used magic on me. A mother has great power, but there is nothing unnatural in it, unless it is used against the child's soul.

Borny had no fear of her. He had his own magic. When she told him she intended leaving, he persuaded her out of it. He wanted to go join the boygroup, he said; he'd been wanting to for a year now. He didn't belong in the auntring any more, all women and girls and little kids. He wanted to go live with other boys. Bit's older brother Yit was a member of the boygroup in the Four Rivers Territory, and would look after a boy from his auntring. And Ednede was getting ready to go. And Borny and Ednede and Bit had been talking to some men, recently. Men weren't all ignorant and crazy, the way Mother thought. They didn't talk much, but they knew a lot.

"What do they know?" Mother asked grimly

"They know how to be men," Borny said. "It's what I'm going to be."

"Not that kind of man — not if I can help it! In Joy Born, you must remember the men on the ship, real men — nothing like these poor, filthy hermits. I can't let you grow up thinking that that's what you have to be!"

"They're not like that," Borny said. "You ought to go talk to some of

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them, Mother."

"Don't be naive," she said with an edgy laugh. "You know perfectly well that women don't go to men to *talk*."

I knew she was wrong; all the women in the auntring knew all the settled men for three days' walk around. They did talk with them, when they were out foraging. They only kept away from the ones they didn't trust; and usually those men disappeared before long. Noyit had told me, "Their magic turns on them." She meant the other men drove them away or killed them. But I didn't say any of this, and Borny said only, "Well, Cave Cliff Man is really nice. And he took us to the place where I found those People things" — some ancient artifacts that Mother had been excited about. "The men know things the women don't," Borny went on. "At least I could go to the boygroup for a while, maybe. I ought to. I could learn a lot! We don't have any solid information on them at all. All we know anything about is this auntring. I'll go and stay long enough to get material for our report. I can't ever come back to either the auntring or the boygroup once I leave them. I'll have to go to the ship, or else try to be a man. So let me have a real go at it, please, Mother?"

"I don't know why you think you have to learn how to be a man," she said after a while. "You know how already."

He really smiled then, and she put her arm around him.

What about me? I thought. I don't even know what the ship is. I want to be here, where my soul is. I want to go on learning to be in the world.

But I was afraid of Mother and Borny, who were both working magic, and so I said nothing and was still, as I had been taught.

Ednede and Borny went off together. Noyit, Ednede's mother, was as glad as Mother was about their keeping company, though she said nothing. The evening before they left, the two boys went to every house in the auntring. It took a long time. The houses were each just within sight or hearing of one or two of the others, with bush and gardens and irrigation ditches and paths in between. In each house the mother and the children were waiting to say goodbye, only they didn't say it; my language has no word for hello or goodbye. They asked the boys in and gave them something to eat, something they could take with them on the way to the Territory. When the boys went to the door everybody in the household came and touched their hand or cheek. I remembered when Yit had gone around the auntring that way. I had cried then, because even though I didn't much like Yit, it seemed so strange

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for somebody to leave forever, like they were dying. This time I didn't cry; but I kept waking and waking again, until I heard Borny get up before the first light and pick up his things and leave quietly. I know Mother was awake too, but we did as we should do, and lay still while he left, and for a long time after.

I have read her description of what she calls "An adolescent male leaves the Auntring: a vestigial survival of ceremony."

She had wanted him to put a radio in his soulbag and get in touch with her at least occasionally. He had been unwilling. "I want to do it right, Mother. There's no use doing it if I don't do it right."

"I simply can't handle not hearing from you at all, Borny," she had said in Hainish.

"But if the radio got broken or taken or something, you'd worry a lot more, maybe with no reason at all."

She finally agreed to wait half a year, till the first rain; then she would go to a landmark, a huge ruin near the river that marked the southern end of the Territory, and he would try and come to her there. "But only wait ten days," he said. "If I can't come, I can't." She agreed. She was like a mother with a little baby, I thought, saying yes to everything. That seemed wrong to me; but I thought Borny was right. Nobody ever came back to their mother from boygroup.

But Borny did.

Summer was long, clear, beautiful. I was learning to starwatch; that is when you lie down outside on the open hills in the dry season at night, and find a certain star in the eastern sky, and watch it cross the sky till it sets. You can look away, of course, to rest your eyes, and doze, but you try to keep looking back at the star and the stars around it, until you feel the earth turning, until you become aware of how the stars and the world and the soul move together. After the certain star sets you sleep until dawn wakes you. Then as always you greet the sunrise with aware silence. I was very happy on the hills those warm great nights, those clear dawns. The first time or two Hyuru and I starwatched together, but after that we went alone, and it was better alone.

I was coming back from such a night, along the narrow valley between Rocky Top and Over Home Hill in the first sunlight, when a man came crashing through the bush down onto the path and stood in front of me. "Don't be afraid," he said, "Listen!" He was heavyset, half naked; he stank.

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I stood still as a stick. He had said "Listen!" just as the aunts did, and I listened. "Your brother and his friend are all right. Your mother shouldn't go there. Some of the boys are in a gang. They'd rape her. I and some others are killing the leaders. It takes a while. Your brother is with the other gang. He's all right. Tell her. Tell me what I said."

I repeated it word for word, as I had learned to do when I listened.

"Right. Good," he said, and took off up the steep slope on his short, powerful legs, and was gone.

Mother would have gone to the Territory right then, but I told the man's message to Noyit, too, and she came to the porch of our house to speak to Mother. I listened to her, because she was telling things I didn't know well and Mother didn't know at all. Noyit was a small, mild woman, very like her son Ednede; she liked teaching and singing, so the children were always around her place. She saw Mother was getting ready for a journey. She said, "House on the Skyline Man says the boys are all right." When she saw Mother wasn't listening, she went on; she pretended to be talking to me, because women don't teach women: "He says some of the men are breaking up the gang. They do that, when the boygroups get wicked. Sometimes there are magicians among them, leaders, older boys, even men who want to make a gang. The settled men will kill the magicians and make sure none of the boys gets hurt. When gangs come out of the Territories, nobody is safe. The settled men don't like that. They see to it that the auntring is safe. So your brother will be all right."

My mother went on packing pigi-roots into her net.

"A rape is a very, very bad thing for the settled men," said Noyit to me. "It means the women won't come to them. If the boys raped some woman, probably the men would kill *all* the boys."

My mother was finally listening.

She did not go to the rendezvous with Borny, but all through the rainy season she was utterly miserable. She got sick, and old Dnemi sent Didsu over to dose her with gagberry syrup. She made notes while she was sick, lying on her mattress, about illnesses and medicines and how the older girls had to look after sick women, since grown women did not enter one another's houses. She never stopped working and never stopped worrying about Borny.

Late in the rainy season, when the warm wind had come and the yellow honey-flowers were in bloom on all the hills, the Golden World time, Noyit

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came by while Mother was working in the garden. "House on the Skyline Man says things are all right in the boygroup," she said, and went on.

Mother began to realize then that although no adult ever entered another's house, and adults seldom spoke to one another, and men and women had only brief, often casual relationships, and men lived all their lives in real solitude, still there was a kind of community, a wide, thin, fine network of delicate and certain intention and restraint: a social order. Her reports to the ship were filled with this new understanding. But she still found Sorovian life impoverished, seeing these persons as mere survivors, poor fragments of the wreck of something great.

"My dear," she said — in Hainish; there is no way to say "my dear" in my language. She was speaking Hainish with me in the house so that I wouldn't forget it entirely. — "My dear, the explanation of an uncomprehended technology as magic *is* primitivism. It's not a criticism, merely a description."

"But technology isn't magic," I said.

"Yes, it is, in their minds; look at the story you just recorded. Before-Time sorcerors who could fly in the air and undersea and underground in magic boxes!"

"In *metal* boxes," I corrected.

"In other words, airplanes, tunnels, submarines; a lost technology explained as supernatural."

"The *boxes* weren't magic," I said. "The *people* were. They were sorcerors. They used their power to get power over other persons. To live rightly a person has to keep away from magic."

"That's a cultural imperative, because a few thousand years ago uncontrolled technological expansion led to disaster. Exactly. There's a perfectly rational reason for the irrational taboo."

I did not know what "rational" and "irrational" meant in my language; I could not find words for them. "Taboo" was the same as "poisonous." I listened to my mother because a daughter must learn from her mother, and my mother knew many, many things no other person knew; but my education was very difficult, sometimes. If only there were more stories and songs in her teaching, and not so many words, words that slipped away from me like water through a net!

The Golden Time passed, and the beautiful summer; the Silver Time

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returned, when the mists lie in the valleys between the hills, before the rains begin; and the rains began, and fell long and slow and warm, day after day after day. We had heard nothing of Borny and Ednede for over a year. Then in the night the soft thrum of rain on the reed roof turned into a scratching at the door and a whisper, "Shh — it's all right — it's all right."

We wakened the fire and crouched at it in the dark to talk. Borny had got tall and very thin, like a skeleton with the skin dried on it. A cut across his upper lip had drawn it up into a kind of snarl that bared his teeth, and he could not say p, b, or m. His voice was a man's voice. He huddled at the fire trying to get warmth into his bones. His clothes were wet rags. The knife hung on a cord around his neck. "It was all right," he kept saying. "I don't want to go on there, though."

He would not tell us much about the year and a half in the boygroup, insisting that he would record a full description when he got to the ship. He did tell us what he would have to do if he stayed on Soro. He would have to go back to the Territory and hold his own among the older boys, by fear and sorcery, always proving his strength, until he was old enough to walk away — that is, to leave the Territory and wander alone till he found a place where the men would let him settle. Ednede and another boy had paired, and were going to walk away together when the rains stopped. It was easier for a pair, he said, if their bond was sexual; so long as they offered no competition for women, settled men wouldn't challenge them. But a new man in the region anywhere within three days' walk of an auntring had to prove himself against the settled men there. "It would 'e three or four years of the same thing," he said, "challenging, fighting, always watching the others, on guard, showing how strong you are, staying alert all night, all day. To end up living alone your whole life. I can't do it." He looked at me. "I'ne not a 'erson," he said. "I want to go ho'e."

"I'll radio the ship now," Mother said quietly, with infinite relief.

"No," I said.

Borny was watching Mother, and raised his hand when she turned to speak to me.

"I'll go," he said. "She doesn't have to. Why should she?" Like me, he had learned not to use names without some reason to.

Mother looked from him to me and finally gave a kind of laugh. "I can't leave her here, Borny!"

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"Why should you go?"

"Because I want to," she said. "I've had enough. More than enough. We've got a tremendous amount of material on the women, over seven years of it, and now you can fill the information gaps on the men's side. That's enough. It's time, past time, that we all got back to our own people. All of us."

"I have no people," I said. "I don't belong to people. I am trying to be a person. Why do you want to take me away from my soul? You want me to do magic! I won't. I won't do magic. I won't speak your language. I won't go with you!"

My mother was still not listening; she started to answer angrily. Borny put up his hand again, the way a woman does when she is going to sing, and she looked at him.

"We can talk later," he said. "We can decide. I need to sleep."

He hid in our house for two days while we decided what to do and how to do it. That was a miserable time. I stayed home as if I were sick so that I would not lie to the other persons, and Borny and Mother and I talked and talked. Borny asked Mother to stay with me; I asked her to leave me with Sadne or Noyit, either of whom would certainly take me into their household. She refused. She was the mother and I the child and her power was sacred. She radioed the ship and arranged for a lander to pick us up in a barren area two days' walk from the auntring. We left at night, sneaking away. I carried nothing but my soulbag. We walked all next day, slept a little when it stopped raining, walked on and came to the desert. The ground was all lumps and hollows and caves, Before-Time ruins; the soil was tiny bits of glass and hard grains and fragments, the way it is in the deserts. Nothing grew there. We waited there.

The sky broke open and a shining thing fell down and stood before us on the rocks, bigger than any house, though not as big as the ruins of the Before Time. My mother looked at me with a queer, vengeful smile. "Is it magic?" she said. And it was very hard for me not to think that it was. Yet I knew it was only a thing, and there is no magic in things, only in minds. I said nothing. I had not spoken since we left my home.

I had resolved never to speak to anybody until I got home again; but I was still a child, used to listen and obey. In the ship, that utterly strange new world, I held out only for a few hours, and then began to cry and ask to go

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home. Please, please, can I go home now.

Everyone on the ship was very kind to me.

Even then I thought about what Borny had been through and what I was going through, comparing our ordeals. The difference seemed total. He had been alone, without food, without shelter, a frightened boy trying to survive among equally frightened rivals against the brutality of older youths intent on having and keeping power, which they saw as manhood. I was cared for, clothed, fed so richly I got sick, kept so warm I felt feverish, guided, reasoned with, praised, befriended by citizens of a very great city, offered a share in their power, which they saw as humanity. He and I had both fallen among sorcerors. Both he and I could see the good in the people we were among, but neither he nor I could live with them.

Borny told me he had spent many desolate nights in the Territory crouched in a fireless shelter, telling over the stories he had learned from the aunts, singing the songs in his head. I did the same thing every night on the ship. But I refused to tell the stories or sing to the people there. I would not speak my language, there. It was the only way I had to be silent.

My mother was enraged, and for a long time unforgiving. "You owe your knowledge to our people," she said. I did not answer, because all I had to say was that they were not my people, that I had no people. I was a person. I had a language that I did not speak. I had my silence. I had nothing else.

I went to school; there were children of different ages on the ship, like an auntring, and many of the adults taught us. I learned Ekumenical history and geography, mostly, and Mother gave me a report to learn about the history of Eleven-Soro, what my language calls the Before Time. I read that the cities of my world had been the greatest cities ever built on any world, covering two of the continents entirely, with small areas set aside for farming; there had been 120 billion people living in the cities, while the animals and the sea and the air and the dirt died, until the people began dying too. It was a hideous story. I was ashamed of it and wished nobody else on the ship or in the Ekumen knew about it. And yet, I thought, if they knew the stories I knew about the Before Time, they would understand how magic turns on itself, and that it must be so.

After less than a year, Mother told us we were going to Hain. The ship's doctor and his clever machines had repaired Borny's lip; he and Mother had put all the information they had into the records; he was old enough to begin

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training for the Ekumenical Schools, as he wanted to do. I was not flourishing, and the doctor's machines were not able to repair me. I kept losing weight, I slept badly, I had terrible headaches. Almost as soon as we came aboard the ship, I had begun to menstruate; each time the cramps were agonizing. "This is no good, this ship life," she said. "You need to be outdoors. On a planet. On a civilized planet."

"If I went to Hain," I said, "when I came back, the persons I know would all be dead hundreds of years ago."

"Serenity," she said, "you must stop thinking in terms of Soro. We have left Soro. You must stop deluding and tormenting yourself, and look forward, not back. Your whole life is ahead of you. Hain is where you will learn to live it."

I summoned up my courage and spoke in my own language: "I am not a child now. You have no power over me. I will not go. Go without me. You have no power over me!"

Those are the words I had been taught to say to a magician, a sorceror. I don't know if my mother fully understood them, but she did understand that I was deathly afraid of her, and it struck her into silence.

After a long time she said in Hainish, "I agree. I have no power over you. But I have certain rights; the right of loyalty; of love."

"Nothing is right that puts me in your power," I said, still in my language.

She stared at me. "You are like one of them," she said. "You are one of them. You don't know what love is. You're closed into yourself like a rock. I should never have taken you there. People crouching in the ruins of a society — brutal, rigid, ignorant, superstitious — Each one in a terrible solitude — And I let them make you into one of them!"

"You educated me," I said, and my voice began to tremble and my mouth to shake around the words, "and so does the school here, but my aunts educated me, and I want to finish my education." I was weeping, but I kept standing with my hands clenched. "I'm not a woman yet. I want to be a woman."

"But Ren, you will be! — ten times the woman you could ever be on Soro — you must try to understand, to believe me — "

"You have no power over me," I said, shutting my eyes and putting my hands over my ears. She came to me then and held me, but I stood stiff, enduring her touch, until she let me go.

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The ship's crew had changed entirely while we were onplanet. The First Observers had gone on to other worlds; our backup was now a Gethenian archeologist named Arrem, a mild, watchful person, not young. Arrem had gone down onplanet only on the two desert continents, and welcomed the chance to talk with us, who had "lived with the living," as heshe said. I felt easy when I was with Arrem, who was so unlike anybody else. Arrem was not a man — I could not get used to having men around all the time — yet not a woman; and so not exactly an adult, yet not a child: a person, alone, like me. Heshe did not know my language well, but always tried to talk it with me. When this crisis came, Arrem came to my mother and took counsel with her, suggesting that she let me go back down onplanet. Borny was in on some of these talks, and told me about them.

"Arrem says if you go to Hain you'll probably die," he said. "Your soul will. Heshe says some of what we learned is like what they learn on Gethen, in their religion. That kind of stopped Mother from ranting about primitive superstition.... And Arrem says you could be useful to the Ekumen, if you stay and finish your education on Soro. You'll be an invaluable resource." Borny sniggered, and after a minute I did too. "They'll mine you like an asteroid," he said. Then he said, "You know, if you stay and I go, we'll be dead."

That was how the young people of the ships said it, when one was going to cross the lightyears and the other was going to stay. Goodbye, we're dead. It was the truth.

"I know," I said. I felt my throat get tight, and was afraid. I had never seen an adult at home cry, except when Sut's baby died. Sut howled all night. Howled like a dog, Mother said, but I had never seen or heard a dog; I heard a woman terribly crying. I was afraid of sounding like that. "If I can go home, when I finish making my soul, who knows, I might come to Hain for a while," I said, in Hainish.

"Scouting?" Borny said in my language, and laughed, and made me laugh again.

Nobody gets to keep a brother. I knew that. But Borny had come back from being dead to me, so I might come back from being dead to him; at least I could pretend I might.

My mother came to a decision. She and I would stay on the ship for another year while Borny went to Hain. I would keep going to school; if at the

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end of the year I was still determined to go back onplanet, I could do so. With me or without me, she would go on to Hain then and join Borny. If I ever wanted to see them again, I could follow them. It was a compromise that satisfied no one, but it was the best we could do, and we all consented.

When he left, Borny gave me his knife.

After he left, I tried not to be sick. I worked hard at learning everything they taught me in the ship school, and I tried to teach Arrem how to be aware and how to avoid witchcraft. We did slow walking together in the ship's garden, and the first hour of the untrance movements from the Handdara of Karhide on Gethen. We agreed that they were alike.

The ship was staying in the Soro system not only because of my family, but because the crew was now mostly zoologists who had come to study a sea animal on Eleven-Soro, a kind of cephalopod that had mutated toward high intelligence, or maybe it already was highly intelligent; but there was a communication problem. "Almost as bad as with the local humans," said Steadiness, the zoologist who taught and teased us mercilessly. She took us down twice by lander to the uninhabited islands in the Northern Hemisphere where her station was. It was very strange to go down to my world and yet be a world away from my aunts and sisters and my soulmate; but I said nothing.

I saw the great, pale, shy creature come slowly up out of the deep waters with a running ripple of colors along its long coiling tentacles and a ringing shimmer of sound, all so quick it was over before you could follow the colors or hear the tune. The zoologist's machine produced a pink glow and a mechanically speeded-up twitter, tinny and feeble in the immensity of the sea. The cephalopod patiently responded in its beautiful silvery shadowy language. "CP," Steadiness said to us, ironic — Communication Problem. "We don't know what we're talking about."

I said, "I learned something in my education here. In one of the songs, it says," and I hesitated, trying to translate it into Hainish, "it says, thinking is one way of doing, and words are one way of thinking."

Steadiness stared at me, in disapproval I thought, but probably only because I had never said anything to her before except "Yes." Finally she said, "Are you suggesting that it doesn't speak in words?"

"Maybe it's not speaking at all. Maybe it's thinking."

Steadiness stared at me some more and then said, "Thank you." She looked as if she too might be thinking. I wished I could sink into the water,

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How could I make my soul? I could barely cling to it. I was in terror that I would lose it altogether.

the way the cephalopod was doing.

The other young people on the ship were friendly and mannerly. Those are words that have no translation in my language. I was unfriendly and unmannerly, and they let me be. I was grateful. But there was no place to be alone on the ship. Of course we each had a room; though small, the *Heyho* was a Hainish-built explorer, designed to give its people room and privacy and comfort and variety and beauty while they hung around in a solar system for years on end. But it was designed. It was all human-made — everything was human. I had much more privacy than I had ever had at home in our one-room house; yet there I had been free and here I was in a trap. I felt the pressure of people all around me, all the time. People around me, people with me, people pressing on me, pressing me to be one of them, to be one of them, one of the people. How could I make my soul? I could barely cling to it. I was in terror that I would lose it altogether.

One of the rocks in my soulbag, a little ugly gray rock that I had picked up on a certain day in a certain place in the hills above the river in the Silver Time, a little piece of my world, that became my world. Every night I took it out and held it in my hand while I lay in bed waiting to sleep, thinking of the sunlight on the hills above the river, listening to the soft hushing of the ship's systems, like a mechanical sea.

The doctor hopefully fed me various tonics. Mother and I ate breakfast together every morning. She kept at work, making our notes from all the years on Eleven-Soro into her report to the Ekumen, but I knew the work did not go well. Her soul was in as much danger as mine was.

"You will never give in, will you, Ren?" she said to me one morning out of the silence of our breakfast. I had not intended the silence as a message. I had only rested in it.

"Mother, I want to go home and you want to go home," I said. "Can't we?"

Her expression was strange for a moment, while she misunderstood me;

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then it cleared to grief, defeat, relief.

"Will we be dead?" she asked me, her mouth twisting.

"I don't know. I have to make my soul. Then I can know if I can come."

"You know I can't come back. It's up to you."

"I know. Go see Borny," I said. "Go home. Here we're both dying." Then noises began to come out of me, sobbing, howling. Mother was crying. She came to me and held me, and I could hold my mother, cling to her and cry with her, because her spell was broken.

From the lander approaching I saw the oceans of Eleven-Soro, and in the greatness of my joy I thought that when I was grown and went out alone I would go to the sea shore and watch the sea-beasts shimmering their colors and tunes till I knew what they were thinking. I would listen, I would learn, till my soul was as large as the shining world. The scarred barrens whirled beneath us, ruins as wide as the continent, endless desolations. We touched down. I had my soulbag, and Borny's knife around my neck on its string, a communicator implant behind my right earlobe, and a medicine kit Mother had made for me. "No use dying of an infected finger, after all," she had said. The people on the lander said good-bye, but I forgot to. I set off out of the desert, home.

It was summer; the night was short and warm; I walked most of it. I got to the auntring about the middle of the second day. I went to my house cautiously, in case somebody had moved in while I was gone; but it was just as we had left it. The mattresses were moldy, and I put them and the bedding out in the sun, and started going over the garden to see what had kept growing by itself. The pigi had got small and seedy, but there were some good roots. A little boy came by and stared; he had to be Migi's baby. After a while Hyuru came by. She squatted down near me in the garden in the sunshine. I smiled when I saw her, and she smiled, but it took us a while to find something to say.

"Your mother didn't come back," she said.

"She's dead," I said.

"I'm sorry," Hyuru said.

She watched me dig up another root.

"Will you come to the singing circle?" she asked.

I nodded.

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She smiled again. With her rosebrown skin and wide-set eyes, Hyuru had become very beautiful, but her smile was exactly the same as when we were little girls. "Hi, ya!" she sighed in deep contentment, lying down on the dirt with her chin on her arms. "This is good!"

I went on blissfully digging.

That year and the next two, I was in the singing circle with Hyuru and two other girls. Didsu still came to it often, and Han, a woman who settled in our auntring to have her first baby, joined it too. In the singing circle the older girls pass around the stories, songs, knowledge they learned from their own mother, and young women who have lived in other auntrings teach what they learned there; so women make each other's souls, learning how to make their children's souls.

Han lived in the house where old Dnemi had died. Nobody in the auntring except Sut's baby had died while my family lived there. My mother had complained that she didn't have any data on death and burial. Sut had gone away with her dead baby and never came back, and nobody talked about it. I think that turned my mother against the others more than anything else. She was angry and ashamed that she could not go and try to comfort Sut and that nobody else did. "It is not human," she said. "It is pure animal behavior. Nothing could be clearer evidence that this is a broken culture — not a society, but the remains of one. A terrible, an appalling poverty."

I don't know if Dnemi's death would have changed her mind. Dnemi was dying for a long time, of kidney failure I think; she turned a kind of dark orange color, jaundice. While she could get around, nobody helped her. When she didn't come out of her house for a day or two, the women would send the children in with water and a little food and firewood. It went on so through the winter; then one morning little Rashi told his mother Aunt Dnemi was "staring." Several of the women went to Dnemi's house, and entered it for the first and last time. They sent for all the girls in the singing circle, so that we could learn what to do. We took turns sitting by the body or in the porch of the house, singing soft songs, child-songs, giving the soul a day and a night to leave the body and the house; then the older women wrapped the body in the bedding, strapped it on a kind of litter, and set off with it toward the barren lands. There it would be given back, under a rock cairn or inside one of the ruins of the ancient city. "Those are the lands of the dead," Sadne said. "What dies stays there."

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Han settled down in that house a year later. When her baby began to be born she asked Didsu to help her, and Hyuru and I stayed in the porch and watched, so that we could learn. It was a wonderful thing to see, and quite altered the course of my thinking, and Hyuru's too. Hyuru said, "I'd like to do that!" I said nothing, but thought, So do I, but not for a long time, because once you have a child you're never alone.

And though it is of the others, of relationships, that I write, the heart of my life has been my being alone.

I think there is no way to write about being alone. To write is to tell something to somebody, to communicate to others. CP, as Steadiness would say. Solitude is non-communication, the absence of others, the presence of a self sufficient to itself.

A woman's solitude in the auntring is, of course, based firmly on the presence of others at a little distance. It is a contingent, and therefore human, solitude. The settled men are connected as stringently to the women, though not to one another; the settlement is an integral though distant element of the auntring. Even a scouting woman is part of the society — a moving part, connecting the settled parts. Only the isolation of a woman or man who chooses to live outside the settlements is absolute. They are outside the network altogether. There are worlds where such persons are called saints, holy people. Since isolation is a sure way to prevent magic, on my world the assumption is that they are sorcerors, outcast by others or by their own will, their conscience.

I knew I was strong with magic, how could I help it? and I began to long to get away. It would be so much easier and safer to be alone. But at the same time, and increasingly, I wanted to know something about the great harmless magic, the spells cast between men and women.

I preferred foraging to gardening, and was out on the hills a good deal; and these days, instead of keeping away from the man's-houses, I wandered by them, and looked at them, and looked at the men if they were outside. The men looked back. Downriver Lame Man's long, shining hair was getting a little white in it now, but when he sat singing his long, long songs I found myself sitting down and listening, as if my legs had lost their bones. He was very handsome. So was the man I remembered as a boy named Tret in the auntring, when I was little, Behyu's son. He had come back from the boygroup and from wandering, and had built a house and made a fine garden in the

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valley of Red Stone Creek. He had a big nose and big eyes, long arms and legs, long hands; he moved very quietly, almost like Arrem doing the untrance. I went often to pick lowberries in Red Stone Creek valley.

He came along the path and spoke. "You were Borny's sister," he said. He had a low voice, quiet.

"He's dead," I said.

Red Stone Man nodded. "That's his knife."

In my world, I had never talked with a man. I felt extremely strange. I kept picking berries.

"You're picking green ones," Red Stone Man said.

His soft, smiling voice made my legs lose their bones again.

"I think nobody's touched you," he said. "I'd touch you gently. I think about it, about you, ever since you came by here early in the summer. Look, here's a bush full of ripe ones. Those are green. Come over here."

I came closer to him, to the bush of ripe berries.

When I was on the ship, Arrem told me that many languages have a single word for sexual desire and the bond between mother and child and the bond between soulmates and the feeling for one's home and worship of the sacred; they are all called love. There is no word that great in my language. Maybe my mother is right, and human greatness perished in my world with the people of the Before Time, leaving only small, poor, broken things and thoughts. In my language, love is many different words. I learned one of them with Red Stone Man. We sang it together to each other.

We made a brush house on a little cove of the creek, and neglected our gardens, but gathered many, many sweet berries.

Mother had put a lifetime's worth of nonconceptives in the little medicine kit. She had no faith in Sorovian herbals. I did, and they worked.

But when a year or so later, in the Golden Time, I decided to go out scouting, I thought I might go places where the right herbs were scarce; and so I stuck the little noncon jewel on the back of my left earlobe. Then I wished I hadn't, because it seemed like witchcraft. Then I told myself I was being superstitious; the noncon wasn't any more witchcraft than the herbs were, it just worked longer. I had promised my mother in my soul that I would never be superstitious. The skin grew over the noncon, and I took my soulbag and Borny's knife and the medicine kit, and set off across the world.

I had told Hyuru and Red Stone Man I would be leaving. Hyuru and I sang

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and talked together all one night down by the river. Red Stone Man said in his soft voice, "Why do you want to go?" and I said, "To get away from your magic, sorceror," which was true in part. If I kept going to him I might always go to him. I wanted to give my soul and body a larger world to be in.

Now to tell of my scouting years is more difficult than ever. CP! A woman scouting is entirely alone, unless she chooses to ask a settled man for sex, or camps in an auntring for a while to sing and listen with the singing circle. If she goes anywhere near the territory of a boygroup, she is in danger; and if she comes on a rogue she is in danger; and if she hurts herself or gets into polluted country, she is in danger. She has no responsibility except to herself, and so much freedom is very dangerous.

In my right earlobe was the tiny communicator; every forty days, as I had promised, I sent a signal to the ship that meant "all well." If I wanted to leave, I would send another signal. I could have called for the lander to rescue me from a bad situation, but though I was in bad situations a couple of times I never thought of using it. My signal was the mere fulfilment of a promise to my mother and her people, the network I was no longer part of, a meaningless communication.

Life in the auntring, or for a settled man, is repetitive, as I said; and so it can be dull. Nothing new happens. The mind always wants new happenings. So for the young soul there is wandering and scouting, travel, danger, change. But of course travel and danger and change have their own dullness. It is finally always the same otherness over again; another hill, another river, another man, another day. The feet begin to turn in a long, long circle. The body begins to think of what it learned back home, when it learned to be still. To be aware. To be aware of the grain of dust beneath the sole of the foot, and the skin of the sole of the foot, and the touch and scent of the air on the cheek, and the fall and motion of the light across the air, and the color of the grass on the high hill across the river, and the thoughts of the body, of the soul, the shimmer and ripple of colors and sounds in the clear darkness of the depths, endlessly moving, endlessly changing, endlessly new.

So at last I came back home. I had been gone about four years.

Hyuru had moved into my old house when she left her mother's house. She had not gone scouting, but had taken to going to Red Stone Creek Valley; and she was pregnant. I was glad to see her living there. The only house empty was an old half-ruined one too close to Hedimi's. I decided to make a new

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house. I dug out the circle as deep as my chest; the digging took most of the summer. I cut the sticks, braced and wove them, and then daubed the framework solidly with mud inside and out. I remembered when I had done that with my mother long, long ago, and how she had said, "That's right. That's good." I left the roof open, and the hot sun of late summer baked the mud into clay. Before the rains came, I thatched the house with reeds, a triple thatching, for I'd had enough of being wet all winter.

My auntring was more a string than a ring, stretching along the north bank of the river for about three kilos; my house lengthened the string a good bit, upstream from all the others. I could just see the smoke from Hyuru's fireplace. I dug it into a sunny slope with good drainage. It is still a good house.

I settled down. Some of my time went to gathering and gardening and mending and all the dull, repetitive actions of primitive life, and some went to singing and thinking the songs and stories I had learned here at home and while scouting, and the things I had learned on the ship, also. Soon enough I found why women are glad to have children come to listen to them, for songs and stories are meant to be heard, listened to. "Listen!" I would say to the children. The children of the auntring came and went, like the little fish in the river, one or two or five of them, little ones, big ones. When they came, I sang or told stories to them. When they left, I went on in silence. Sometimes I joined the singing circle to give what I had learned traveling to the older girls. And that was all I did; except that I worked, always, to be aware of all I did.

By solitude the soul escapes from doing or suffering magic; it escapes from dullness, from boredom, by being aware. Nothing is boring if you are aware of it. It may be irritating, but it is not boring. If it is pleasant the pleasure will not fail so long as you are aware of it. Being aware is the hardest work the soul can do, I think.

I helped Hyuru have her baby, a girl, and played with the baby. Then after a couple of years I took the noncon out of my left earlobe. Since it left a little hole, I made the hole go all the way through with a burnt needle, and when it healed I hung in it a tiny jewel I had found in a ruin when I was scouting. I had seen a man on the ship with a jewel hung in his ear that way. I wore it when I went out foraging. I kept clear of Red Stone Valley. The man there behaved as if he had a claim on me, a right to me. I liked him still, but I did not like that smell of magic about him, his imagination of power over me. I went up into the hills, northward.

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A pair of young men had settled in old North House about the time I came home. Often boys got through boygroup by pairing, and often they stayed paired when they left the Territory. It helped their chances of survival. Some of them were sexually paired, others weren't; some stayed paired, others didn't. One of this pair had gone off with another man last summer. The one that stayed wasn't a handsome man, but I had noticed him. He had a kind of solidness I liked. His body and hands were short and strong. I had courted him a little, but he was very shy. This day, a day in the Silver Time when the mist lay on the river, he saw the jewel swinging in my ear, and his eyes widened.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" I said.

He nodded.

"I wore it to make you look at me," I said.

He was so shy that I finally said, "If you only like sex with men, you know, just tell me." I really was not sure.

"Oh, no," he said, "no. No." He stammered and then bolted back down the path. But he looked back; and I followed him slowly, still not certain whether he wanted me or wanted to be rid of me.

He waited for me in front of a little house in a grove of redroot, a lovely little bower, all leaves outside, so that you would walk within arm's length of it and not see it. Inside he had laid sweet grass, deep and dry and soft, smelling of summer. I went in, crawling because the door was very low, and sat in the summer-smelling grass. He stood outside. "Come in," I said, and he came in very slowly.

"I made it for you," he said.

"Now make a child for me," I said.

And we did that; maybe that day, maybe another.

Now I will tell you why after all these years I called the ship, not knowing even if it was still there in the space between the planets, asking for the lander to meet me in the barren land.

When my daughter was born, that was my heart's desire and the fulfilment of my soul. When my son was born, last year, I knew there is no fulfilment. He will grow toward manhood, and go, and fight and endure, and live or die as a man must. My daughter, whose name is Yedneke, Leaf, like my mother, will grow to womanhood and go or stay as she chooses. I will live alone. This is as it should be, and my desire. But I am of two worlds; I am a person of this world, and a woman of my mother's people. I owe my

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knowledge to the children of her people. So I asked the lander to come, and spoke to the people on it. They gave me my mother's report to read, and I have written my story in their machine, making a record for those who want to learn one of the ways to make a soul. To them, to the children I say: Listen! Avoid magic! Be aware!

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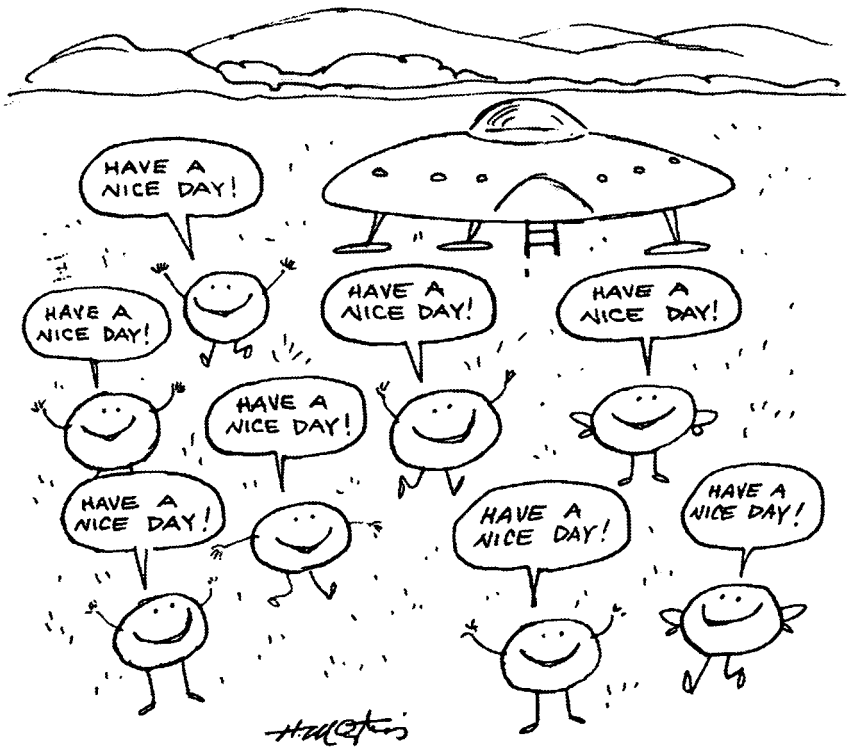

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

We had so much material in our December issue that we were unable to fit in our usual Competition. The Competition will appear next month.

This is not to imply that our first issue of 1995 is short on content. No, indeed. January is our unofficial holiday issue and we will celebrate with a new novelette from **Nina Kiriki Hoffman**. In "Home for Christmas," she explores the relationship between Matt, a homeless woman, and James, a lonely businessman whom she meets on Christmas Eve. Only Matt isn't an ordinary woman. She can make kitchen utensils dance, and credit cards talk to her. James, in need of a bit of magic, has secrets of his own. The resulting story is a holiday treat.

Our cover story, "Tea and Hamsters," by **Michael Coney**, is not a holiday story, but it should be. Michael returns to the scene of his previous *F&SF* story, "Sophie's Spyglass," with a near-future sf tale about neighbors, cats, and large alien reptiles.

Harlan Ellison, rested from his sabbatical in Tibet, appears for the third month in a row. Harlan wrote "Keyboard" in a bookstore window in San Francisco. As he often does when he writes in public, Harlan asks a friend to give him an idea in a sealed envelope when Harlan arrives at the signing. This time, the friend was actor **Robin Williams** who knew of Harlan's dislike of computers. The idea, of course, was of a vampiric computer with a nasty...byte. The result is a vicious little story that rings all too true for those of us who stare at computer screens late into the night.

January's issue is just the beginning of a good year for *F&SF*. In future issues we have stories by old friends and new. **Jack Williamson** returns with a strong novelette about Mars. **Michael Bishop** shares "Three Dreams in the Wake of a Death," and we get to view lycanthropy through the eyes of **Pat Murphy**. **Richard Bowes**, **Felicity Savage**, and **Laurel Winter** have stories dark and delightful in our inventory. And of course, our columnists will add their insights about the world of books, films, science, and the science fiction field. So now is the time to find the ad for our holiday rates, and give *F&SF* to all of your friends.

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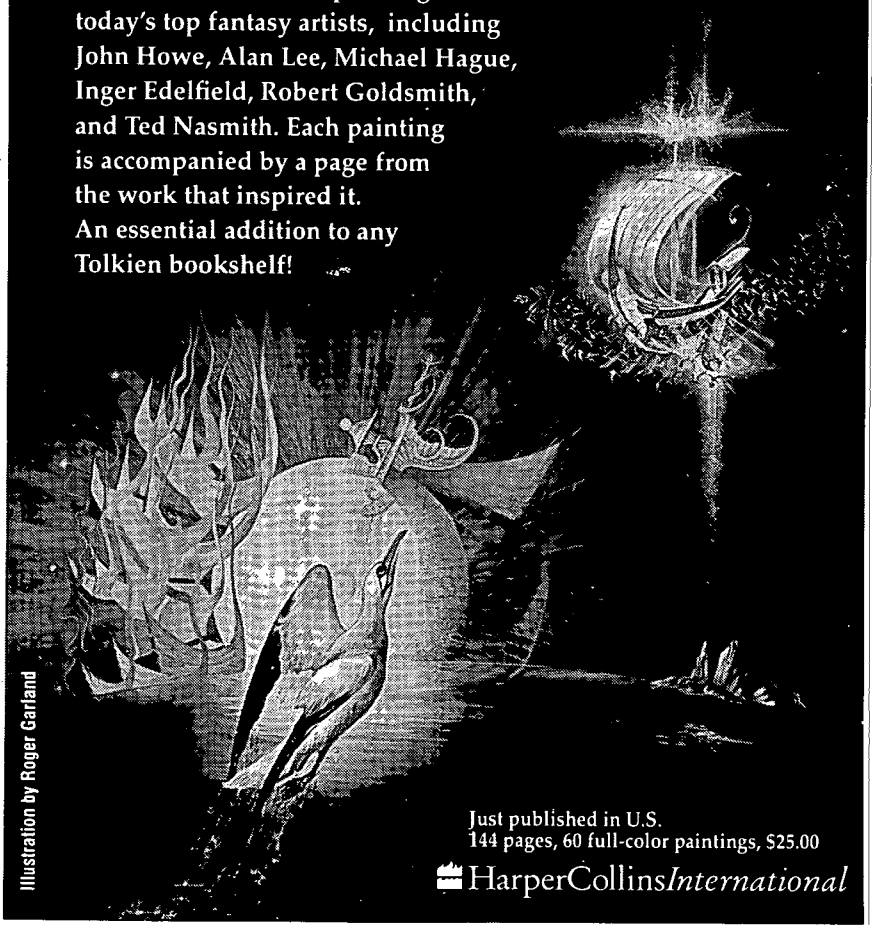

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